

SANTIAGO, CHILE

# Plan Común

Plan Común started making a name for itself with a series of 50 elegant isometric drawings *Common Places*. In this ongoing collaborative project, the Chilean-French architecture studio seeks to, quite simply, give the city back to its citizens; its name – ‘Common Plan’ – says it all. Through drawings, the architects reactivate neglected areas, open up private spaces, reclaim visual fields, lift up buildings to liberate the ground floor, prioritise pedestrians and create new spaces to be enjoyed by all. Roundabouts are turned into secret gardens, street parties are hosted on office rooftops, commercial billboards become cultural displays, circular plazas welcome barbecues and kites, while swimmers dive into square pools.

The formal interventions are quite minimal – a few lines give shape to structural frames and canopies, stairs and footbridges. It is precisely in their simplicity that they are disarming, brought to life with vegetation, water and, most importantly, densely populated with little silhouettes. A child could, perhaps, have thought of them. But the approach is consistent, the proportions well suited – not too big, not too small – and the forms’ starkness suggests a wide range of uses and appropriation, always encouraging the gathering of people and sharing of open space. In today’s world of constant supply and ever-increasing demand, its proposals are open to all.

Plan Común recently completed a series of brick plinths in Nove Fužine, in collaboration with Tiago Torres-Campos, to test ideas at 1:1 and launch the 25th Design Biennial at MAO, Ljubljana’s museum of architecture and design. Slovenia or elsewhere, the sites matter little in their isometrics. The formal constructions could be anywhere, or everywhere. Ignoring the specificities of place, the architects respond to a set of conditions. The context of the isometrics is never identifiable, yet always recognisable. The drawings’ anonymity makes them widely applicable and suggests the difference that could be made in the real world, be it in Graz’s centre or São Paulo’s suburbs.

Its point of departure is the realisation that, under our current neoliberal economy, cities are no longer the expression of social democracy but the product of market forces. The studio’s current base, Chile, is the most ‘unequal developed country’ according to 2015 OECD data – a ‘neoliberal laboratory’ says the young practice. Its response is to fight the colonising

effects of consumption and reinstate a sociopolitical position in urban planning.

In Monumental Shrines, one of its formal propositions realised with Marcelo Cox, 3x3x3m mausoleums celebrating the lives of important figures are placed at busy traffic intersections. The single-material structures are envisioned as both containers of history and creators of memory. Death, too, is on Plan Común’s agenda. And it is not only bringing it back into the lively streets, it is also extending urban life into the cemetery. Santiago’s Cementerio General, one of Latin America’s largest, is a huge open space at the heart of the city, currently neglected yet full of potential – especially in a city where there is little public space ‘in good condition, integrated into the urban fabric, accessible via the city’s public transport network, and of architectural interest’.

Representative of Chilean society, its diversity and its inequalities – the southern end is listed as historical monument while the subsequent northern extension houses the dead of the lowest social strata – the cemetery is a direct reflection of the city of the living. Reminiscent of Calvino, where ‘the living Laudomia has to seek in the Laudomia of the dead the explanation of itself, even at the risk of finding more there, or less’, Plan Común confronts monumentality with banality, extravagance with precarity, forcing life and death to coexist. It claims it is ‘urgent to overcome the fear and paralysis that stops us from intervening in places associated with spirituality in order to reclaim the cemetery’s 86 hectares and its surroundings as space of urban activity’.

‘We believe that architecture is a common field of knowledge that exceeds individual agendas and egos,’ says Plan Común. It seems as if, more and more, young architects feel comfortable acknowledging the influence of their peers and predecessors – a healthy change. Advocates of more collaboration among practitioners, the Chilean-French quartet instils the belief that, by coming together, we can reclaim the public sphere and, who knows, make a real difference. Therefore, unsurprisingly, the studio doesn’t feel that its work is particularly unique – and it likes that. But its determination to transform an ill-fated place and encourage us to rethink our relationship to mortality certainly makes it stand out. *Manon Mollard*

