

Constructing an alternative urban reality

Mexican artist Héctor Zamora's ambitious public projects often bridge art and architecture in spectacular ways. Virginia Were reports.

When I spoke to Mexican artist Héctor Zamora, while he was in town researching a work commissioned for Auckland Arts Festival 2011, he described his work in terms of “mosquito bites” and “snake bites”. By this he meant his work is at its most effective when it functions as an agent provocateur, drawing attention to the social, ecological, architectural and political dynamics of cities and how these aspects impact, both positively and negatively, on their inhabitants – people.

Next year New Zealand audiences are in for a real treat when Zamora realizes his commissioned project for SCAPE 2010, which was cancelled because of the Christchurch earthquake and has been rescheduled for March 2011, and his work for the Auckland Arts Festival – also in March 2011. It might just happen that we're able to experience two works by Héctor Zamora in two different cities at the same time.

He wryly describes his 2006 public work, *Geometrias Daninhas* (harmful geometries in English) as a “mosquito bite”. Commissioned for the 27 Biennial of São Paulo, it was planned as an intervention on a large manmade urban lake in São Paulo, which would introduce over 2220 m² of water hyacinth contained by 51 octagonal structures made from PVC pipes, but the project was never fully realised. Though the city authorities initially approved it, the decision was then reversed because of fears the water hyacinths would colonize and contaminate the Ibirapuera lake. Rather than seeing this as a failure, Zamora was pleased the stymied project nevertheless succeeded in provoking a hot debate about the issues he sought to raise in response to the biennial's exhibition title, *How to live together?*

Throughout the biennial, the octagonal structures floated on the lake. They were to have contained a plant, which fascinated the artist because of its peculiar and





Opposite page: Héctor Zamora, *Praia Recanto Das Crianças*, 2006, variable, tyre chambers, 27th Biennial of São Paulo, São Vicente, Brazil. All photos courtesy of the artist

Above: Héctor Zamora, *Paracaidista. av. Revolución 1608 BIS*, 2004, 74m2, steel, wood and asphalt carton, Museum of Art Carillo Gil, Mexico D.F., Mexico

opposing characteristics – though it’s a native of tropical and sub-tropical South America, much valued for its beautiful flowers, it also has the potential to become an invasive, pernicious pest, which if left uncontrolled will smother ponds and lakes, robbing the water of oxygen and light and killing all aquatic life. Water hyacinths thrive in polluted conditions and in some circumstances are used for wastewater treatment.

Zamora’s work defies simple didactic readings, although the idea of the city as a living organism with its own self-regulating systems seems to be a recurring element in his exceptional public sculpture projects. He comments, “I think for me the city is not against nature as many people believe. I’m seeing the city as an organism – as something that is the relative of an animal (we are animals). I don’t want my work to be seen as against the city. I want to put these things on the table so we remember they have to be discussed. And probably the trajectory I’m following is a bit like biting – when you have a bite from a mosquito you get a reaction – it’s not something nice. But probably this mosquito bite returns your mind to your body, and reminds you that you have a hand. So rather than solving the problem, I’m trying to put your attention onto something, which you’re probably forgetting during your daily journey – you’re disconnected from your environment. *Geometrias Daninhas* is an example of that.”

Another aspect that defines Zamora’s practice is a real generosity of spirit when it comes to working with others – not necessarily artists – and engaging, often through

exhaustive research, with the citizens of the cities in which he’s working. “When you have to work with outer spaces you’re trying to introduce a really strong discussion, dialogue and contact – not only with the formal part of the city – it’s probably more important that you are trying to make something for the citizens.”

When he was unable to complete *Geometrias Daninhas* for São Paulo’s biennial, for instance, he created a second biennial project on the fly. Titled *Praia Recanto das Crianças*, 2006, it involved a community of swimmers enjoying a day at the beach in São Paulo and a collection of inner tubes from tyres. In the catalogue Zamora described his idea thus: “Detonate a game party on the beach where people may use rubber rings taken from tyres to float and enjoy together building a floating structure. Its shape will be determined by the participants and it will be influenced by the stream and tides of the sea.”

Perhaps the best example of why he’s recognized as a leading artist, operating in the field of public, social and collaborative sculpture, is his stop-you-dead-in-your-tracks work, *Paracaidista. Av. Revolución 1608 bis* at the Museum of Art Carillo Gil in 2004.

This intervention onto the façade of Mexico City’s major museum, Museum of Art Carillo Gil, shows his enviable ability to effectively engage with the specifics of site – especially the enormity of scale that is Mexico City – his sensitivity to key urban social issues, not to mention his passion for architecture – in particular the design and fabrication of light architectural structures. Again in this project he uses an organic metaphor from



Héctor Zamora in front of his work *Synclastic/Anticlastic* at the Liverpool Biennial 2010
Photo: Paul McMullin

nature – that of a parasite. In this case the shanty dwellers who appropriate uninhabited land on the periphery of Mexico City, ingeniously and creatively constructing their ‘houses’ from cheap and discarded materials to meet their own needs.

The word *paracaidista* (parachutist) is a colloquial term for shanty dwellers, who are the fastest growing community in Mexico City. As well as drawing attention to the complex social problems in the intensely complex metropolis of Mexico City, Zamora sees *Paracaidista* as homage to the makeshift but also highly adaptive, organic and successful architecture of the shanty dwellers. Over several months he visited many of these settlements, taking photographs that captured the impoverished conditions in which these people live. But rather than attempting to critique or recreate these conditions for opportunistic reasons, he wanted to understand the *paracaidistas’* methods of construction. These improvising engineers often manage to successfully overcome the adverse building conditions found on the steep mountain slopes that form the Valle de Mexico. For him, the ingenuity of these builders and the anarchic arrangement of large settlements – so different from the city centre but nevertheless with their own order and logic – were important reference points.

Initially the idea of the curatorial team at the Museum of Art Carillo Gil was to commission projects for the museum’s façade to make the building more recognizable as a site for contemporary art. This proposal was also prompted by the fact that passersby tended not to notice the museum.

In response, Zamora conceived the almost apocalyptic vision of an organism ‘infecting’ a government-sanctioned symbol of Mexican culture. After nearly a year and a half of intense work (all of it by hand), his prefabricated ‘house’ – made from lightweight steel frames, cheap, readily available timber and bitumen-coated cardboard (as its external cladding) – was hoisted by hand onto

the museum by the collaborative team of workers (who themselves had lived in shanty towns on the outskirts of the city). “They are my friends and many of the final solutions for the house came directly from their collaboration,” says Zamora.

In a symbiotic relationship with its host the enormous lightweight ‘house’ clung improbably to the museum, providing Zamora with a spacious, airy home for three months, and sharing the museum’s water, light and sewage systems – even its actual street address. The suffix “bis” in the work’s title is used when two dwellings occupy the same address. With its long narrow passages, awkward staircases leading to other rooms and its nocturnal views of the city, the interior of Zamora’s ‘house’ recalled a space station as much as it did a parasite. In turn the spectacle of the ‘house’ aroused great curiosity, drawing people to the museum at a time when visitor numbers had been low.

Zamora says *Paracaidista* was also a metaphor for the fact the museum was not in good health at the time. “The institution was ill – it was not confident about the future, and it was cutting budgets for exhibitions. When you’re ill you have low defences, and you get a parasite.”

As had happened in Zamora’s project, *Geometrias Daninhas*, permission was granted by the authorities, then – not surprisingly given the radical, anarchic nature of *Paracaidista* – revoked. Zamora’s team fought for five months to have the project re-approved, and all the correspondence with city authorities is included in the catalogue. Finally, a supportive letter, from the son of the late architect who designed the museum, tipped the balance and *Paracaidista* was finally presented on the museum’s facade from 28 August to 28 November 2004.

Gonzalo Ortega writes in his catalogue essay, which is the third stage of the project: “Mexico City is the complete antithesis of the hygienic model of ‘first world’ cities where organised housing stretches out to the horizon. In Mexico City you can see the overcrowding of thousands of people who must find a way to coexist. Overwhelming poverty and ostentatious abundance are continually encountered in close proximity to one another. Since the Museo de Arte Carillo Gil is located in an affluent residential and commercial zone in the south of the city, the artist’s emulation of an impoverished settlement necessarily engendered a degree of social friction. Upon seeing the enormous monstrosity anchored to the external wall of the museum, one could not avoid a mixed feeling of irritation, surprise and admiration.”

“I was trying to make the project very plural and involve many different groups like architects, visual arts, and people involved in policies about the social situation in Mexico City. We were trying to discuss all these things, and of course this was probably not like a mosquito bite – it was a little bit like a snake,” he says with a wicked laugh.