

Title, **My Own Public Heterotopia**

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Michel Foucault coined the term 'heterotopia' to designate a kind of materialized utopia. Heterotopias, he said, are 'other spaces', spaces set apart – Oriental gardens, cemeteries, museums, brothels or colonies. Such spaces contradict while, at the same time, remain embedded in the everyday world. Unlike utopias (literally 'nowhere'), which are inherently unreal spaces, heterotopias are simultaneously real and virtual, material and mythic. They function as a mirror, reflecting the world back to itself. Heterotopias operate as 'counter-sites' that represent, contest and invert the everyday spaces in which we live.

Lucy Orta's *Refuge Wear* and *Nexus Architecture* projects are heterotopic in this sense. Orta crafts personal wearable architectures that once occupied and mobilized in city spaces operate as miniaturized counter-sites. As architectures and performances her works trace meandering itineraries and activate sporadic critical inversions that comment upon and contest taken-for-granted conditions of contemporary urban life: displacement, exile, poverty, homelessness. Her projects are never merely utopian because they are both 'mythic and real': they are realized, fabricated and deliberately situated in the city, but sustain a mythic aura because they resist the realist, propositional mode of the architect, urban designer or planner. Suspended in this space between reality and myth, Orta equips and choreographs her urban subjects such that they stand witness to the troubles of the world. Orta's projects disturb our received picture of the world and solicit us to attend to it anew. Like Foucault's heterotopic spaces, they are catalysts for new attitudes to the city and the way we live in it.

An example of this is the way Orta's work restructures the relational and scalar dimensions of the notion of shelter itself. Heterotopic projects such as *Refuge Wear* and *Nexus Architecture* radically re-define conventional urbanist doctrines for planning and designing habitable spaces. Nowhere is this more evident than when we put Orta's work back in touch with modernist visions of shelter, such as that of the *existenzminimum* (minimum subsistence) dwelling. This highly influential facet of modernist architectural ideology, first formulated in 1929 at the second meeting of the international modernist architecture congress (CIAM) held in Frankfurt, was concerned with establishing scientifically the minimal 'dwelling ration' that might be the basis for mass workers' housing provision. Taking the body as a biological unit of analysis, Bauhaus architects such as Walter Gropius, sought to calculate an 'elementary minimum of space, air, light and heat' in order that the worker might 'fully develop his life functions'. This doctrine, a scientific utopia in the sense that it sought to be applied everywhere, became the foundational formula for many visions of mass housing provision in the twentieth century, and particularly the adoption of the modernist highrise as a universal housing solution. It was a utopian experiment in re-imaging shelter, the consequences of which are still being worked through today.

The *existenzminimum* dwelling and Orta's work are strangely integral to each other. Each uses the relation between body and shelter to revision the relational infrastructure of contemporary urban living. Each is concerned with the status of the individual and the collective. But at the same time they are, of course, polar opposites: one utopian, the other heterotopic; one universal in its ambitions, the other situated and bespoke; one prescriptive the other performative. They are, then, opposites that attract. But more significantly, Orta's work attracts the image of modernist urban ideology so as to reveal its poverty. In this sense her work operates as a kind of anamorphoscope, a cylindrical mirror designed to be placed in a distorted visual field so as to reconstitute a coherent visual image. The complexly configured counter-sites of Orta's work offer not only a critical inversion of the world, but a compelling injunction to innovate around age-old questions of how to dwell in it.

Dr Stephen Cairns is based at the University of Edinburgh where he teaches and researches on architectural design and theory with a particular emphasis on postcolonial theory. He recently edited *Drifting: Architecture and Migrancy* (Routledge 2004).