

Los Carpinteros's **Transportable City**

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Contemporary Projects

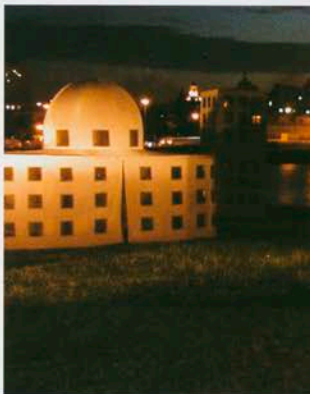
Cover:

Los Carpinteros,
Transportable City, 2000,
installation views,
7th Havana Biennial, Cuba,
winter 2000–2001.
Photos: Alexandre Arrechea

Los Carpinteros's Transportable City

Transportable City (*Ciudad transportable*), 2000, is an installation of ten tents created by the Cuban artists collaborative Los Carpinteros. The three artists who make up the collaborative—Alexandre Arrechea, Marco Castillo, and Dagoberto Rodríguez—have been working together since 1991, when they were students at Havana's Instituto Superior de Arte, and have been known as Los Carpinteros (The Carpenters) since 1994. The name arose because their early pieces were, as Arrechea has explained, "based on work with hand tools, wood, items [that] are used by a carpenter. Our pieces were like miniature furniture, souvenirs, and so forth. For this reason people began calling us Los Carpinteros."¹ Castillo has elaborated, "*Los Carpinteros* seemed perfect for us because we wanted to investigate issues of the way art is made. . . . To speak of a carpenter is to speak of the way something is made."²

While Los Carpinteros's work continues to address the act of art making, it also investigates issues that relate more generally to the human condition at the beginning of the twenty-first century. **Transportable City**—first shown at the 7th Havana Biennial exhibition held in winter 2000–2001—includes ten tents made of nylon and aluminum tubing, shaped in iconic architectural forms, such as a Gothic-arched church, a domed capitol, a lighthouse, a factory, and a jail. The artists believe that these building types convey the essence of contemporary life. According to Arrechea, "We thought about a little town, a village; it has a building for power, a prison, a hospital, it has the basic [structures], buildings where people can live as well. . . . We wanted the basic things [that people need to survive]."³ As Rodríguez explains, **Transportable City** is about "the basic minimum that a person . . . or society needs to function. We wanted to create the basic cell of what a city could be."



Los Carpinteros, **Capitol**, from **Transportable City**, 2000, installation view, 7th Havana Biennial, Cuba, winter 2000–2001. Photo: Alexandre Arrechea

Although an outside observer might be tempted to interpret the desire to create a portable city as something uniquely Cuban, reflective of a country where the architectural infrastructure is in dire need of rehabilitation, Los Carpinteros view the project quite differently. For them the concept is "not a specifically Cuban phenomenon but a global phenomenon. It could be taken to any latitude; it's a question of any place," says Rodríguez. Arrechea adds, "It's really global. We thought about migration . . . the kind of population that has to move from one place to another, for one reason or another . . . because of natural disasters or wars." The portability of the "buildings" of **Transportable City** underscores the migratory nature of contemporary urban existence; in fact, the tents are specifically designed to be dismantled, packed up, and transported, just as ordinary camping tents would be. For the artists this very portability has value, as it suggests that the tents can be, in Castillo's words, "a way to relieve nostalgia. When people have to leave their [homes], they think about their city, the buildings that they left behind. . . . If you carry that [with you], you don't even have to think about it."

The itinerant, endlessly migratory existence on a global level is quintessentially postmodern:

[The twentieth] century has seen a drastic expansion of mobility, including tourism, migrant labor, immigration, urban sprawl. More and more people "dwell" with the help of mass transit, automobiles, airplanes. In cities on six continents foreign populations have come to stay. . . . The "exotic" is uncannily close. Conversely, there seem no distant places left on the planet where the presence of "modern" products, media, and power cannot be felt. An older topography and experience of travel is exploded. One no longer leaves home confident of finding something radically new, another time or space. Difference is encountered in the adjoining neighborhood, the familiar turns up at the ends of the earth.⁴



Los Carpinteros, **Prison**, from **Transportable City**, 2000, installation view, 7th Havana Biennial, Cuba, winter 2000–2001. Photo: Alexandre Arrechea

The postmodern world—with its high-tech communications systems and high-speed travel on the one hand, and regional wars, famines, and natural disasters on the other—is simultaneously one big global village and myriad local villages, whose itinerant inhabitants constantly move across and around the globe. As a result, this nomadic experience “inevitably implies another sense of ‘home,’ of being in the world. It means to conceive of dwelling as a mobile habitat, as a mode of inhabiting time and space not as though they were fixed and closed structures.”⁵ Similarly, “the exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional.”⁶ This migratory sense of “home” or “community” as provisional and ever shifting, as well as endlessly present no matter what the context, can be seen not only in the work of Los Carpinteros but also in that of other contemporary artists and writers. Those addressing analogous issues include visual artists Rirkrit Tiravanija (who himself is New York–based though born to Thai parents and raised in Ethiopia, Thailand, and Canada) and Mona Hatoum (a Palestinian born in Lebanon who lives and works in London), as well as cultural theorists Homi Bhabha (born and educated as part of a Persian ethnic minority in India, now on the faculty at the University of Chicago) and Edward Said (a Palestinian born in Jerusalem, educated in elite British colonial schools as a refugee in Egypt before completing his higher education in the United States, who now teaches at Columbia University in New York).

The idea behind **Transportable City** first emerged in 1997, when Los Carpinteros made two tent-buildings for an exhibition of contemporary Latin American art in Mexico. These tents—a church and a lighthouse—were made of the brightly colored nylon currently used for camping tents. The artists subsequently decided to use a neutral sand color for **Transportable City**. It is possible that the project may grow in the future through the addition of more tents.

Los Carpinteros's collaborative creative process expanded with the creation of **Transportable City**, although all three members of the collective are quick to say that their basic working method remains unchanged. The artists work together in their studio creating drawings in which—as Arrechea explains—“all the ideas come up. . . . Sometimes we [all] work on the same drawing, sometimes not.” As Rodríguez succinctly puts it, “Our art comes out of a certain form of group therapy.” Their three-dimensional work subsequently evolves from these drawings. Originally the three-dimensional work, like the drawings, was completely handmade by the artists themselves. With **Transportable City**, Los Carpinteros began to work with professional fabricators, including experts in computer-assisted design and engineering, metalworkers, and those who sew the fabric. Just as the notion of a city (a home) is never fixed geographically, for Los Carpinteros, “a work of art is never completely individual.”

Carol S. Eliel

Curator

Modern and Contemporary Art

1. Quoted in Rosa Lowinger, “The Object as Protagonist: An Interview with Los Carpinteros,” **Sculpture** 18, no. 10 (December 1999): 25.

2. *Ibid.*

3. This and subsequent quotations from the artists are from an interview by the author, Los Angeles, May 4, 2001.

4. James Clifford, **The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art** (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 13–14.

5. Iain Chambers, **Migrancy, Culture, Identity** (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 4.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

Exhibition checklist

Los Carpinteros

Alexandre Arrechea, b. Cuba 1970
 Marco Castillo, b. Cuba 1971
 Dagoberto Rodríguez, b. Cuba 1969

Transportable City

(Ciudad transportable), 2000
 Nylon, aluminum, and zippers
 Overall dimensions variable
 Los Carpinteros, courtesy
 Grant Selwyn Fine Art



Apartment Building
 Edificio por departamento
 13' 1/2" x 5' 1/2" x 5' 1/2"



Lighthouse
 Faro
 12' 1/2" x 4' 6" (diam.)



Capitol
 Capitolio
 11' 6" x 19' 9" x 7' 6"



Military Building
 Edificio militar
 6' 4/2" x 13' 1/2" x 13' 1/2"



Church
 Iglesia
 8' 1/2" x 5' 6" x 12' 9"



Prison
 Prisión
 7' 6" x 8' 3" (diam.)



Factory
 Fábrica
 14' 10/2" x 6' 6" x 16' 4/2"



University
 Universidad
 7' 10/2" x 16' 4/2" x 6' 6"



Hospital
 Hospital
 7' 10/2" x 16' 4/2" x 16' 4/2"



Warehouse
 Almacén
 6' 6" x 6' 3" x 16' 4/2"



Los Carpinteros (from left to right: Dagoberto Rodríguez, Marco Castillo, Alexandre Arrechea) inside **Church**, from **Transportable City**, 2000, installation view, P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York, May 2001.
 Photo: Pedro Abascal

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