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PREVI: EXPERIMENTAL HOUSING PROJECT IN LIMA

"I am writing to you in reference to the International Competition for the Design of a Low-cost Housing Pilot Project in Lima, Peru. I am pleased to be able to inform you that the United Nations in collaboration with the Government of Peru has now finalized arrangements to make it possible for a group of your houses [...] to be included in the first building stage." This comes from a letter by Peter Land, head of the United Nations Experimental Housing Project in Lima, to Oskar Hansen and Svein Hatløy in September 1970.[1] Both had taken part in the competition, with Hansen being the only participant invited from the Eastern Bloc, which turned out to be an excellent opportunity to test the assumptions of his Linear Continuous System (LCS) in different cultural and climatic conditions.

The competition announced in July 1968 formed the first stage of *Proyecto Experimental de Vivienda* (PREVI), a project initiated by the Peruvian president and architect Fernando Belaúnde Terry in collaboration with the UN.[2] The aim of the three-stage project was to find a solution to an increasing deficit of housing and prevent uncontrolled urban sprawl in the form of self-made residential districts [*barriadas*]. The competition, which was open to all Peruvian architects and by invitation to 13 international teams, was expected to result in an innovative design of model neighborhood of approximately 1,500 low-cost houses, which could then be used in Lima to form the basis of a new state-housing policy.

The international participants in the competition, including James Stirling, Aldo van Eyck, Christopher Alexander, Charles Correa and the Candilis-Josic-Woods studio,[3] dealt with the task of designing a low-rise, high-density neighborhood comprising one or two-story houses based on a prefabricated module. One of the requirements was the flexibility of the designed

1 Letter from Peter Land, September 10, 1970, Oskar Hansen Archive, Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts Museum.

2 PREVI and its results were described in detail in "PREVI/Lima. Low Cost Housing Project," *Architectural Design*, no. 4, 1970, pp. 187–205. See also Fernando García-Huidobro, Diego Torres Torriti, Nicolás Tugas, *Time Builds! Experimental Housing Project (PREVI), Lima. Genesis and Outcome*, Gustavo Gili, Barcelona 2008; Fernando García-Huidobro, Diego Torres Torriti, Nicolás Tugas, "The Experimental Housing Project (PREVI), Lima: The Making of a Neighborhood," *Architectural Design*, vol. 81, issue 3 (*Latin America at the Crossroads*), May–June 2011, pp. 26–31. I would like to thank Prof. Peter Land for additional information on the project.

3 For complete list of contributors, see "PREVI / Lima," op.cit., pp. 187–188.

structure: "The dwelling was not to be conceived as a fixed unit but as a structure with a cycle of evolution."[4] This assumption brought the neighborhood closer to the self-generated shape of the Peruvian barriadas, which fascinated foreign competitors.[5] This was generally expressed by adding the possibility of extending the house to a third story or determining internal partitions according to the specific needs of each inhabitant.

The requirements in question seemed to be made to measure for Hansen, author of the Open Form theory, who previously attempted to introduce similar flexibility in prefabricated mass housing in the People's Republic of Poland. With varying degrees of success, what he had promoted in his Rakowiec and Przyczółek Grochowski housing estates in Warsaw, and in the Juliusz Słowacki Housing Estate in Lublin, formed an essential condition of his design for the Lima competition. Together with Svein Hatløy,[6] Hansen proposed dwellings based on thin units from reinforced concrete, precast on the building site. Serving as the components that formed both walls and roofs of the future housing, the units were supplemented by lighter elements—like blocks, beams, plates, wickerwork and textiles—which were to be given to inhabitants, allowing them to finish their apartments individually. [FIG. 1]

In its functional layout, the neighborhood was inspired by the concept of LCS with parallel belts comprising serviced and servicing zones. The neighborhood for 1,500 houses formed a germ for this structure, awaiting future development and multiplication. [FIG. 2] As a tight relation to the surroundings was one of the key premises of LCS, its Peruvian incarnation adjusted to different geographical and climatic conditions. While the residential belts in the Polish version were meant to follow the courses of major rivers, the Peruvian LCS adapted to the direction of tradewinds. Hansen and Hatløy's design made use of those winds as natural air-conditioning, introducing them into the neighborhood and individual houses through special apertures in precast modules.

After selecting the winners of the competition— three Peruvian designs and three international designs (by Herbert Ohl from West Germany, Kiyonori Kikutake, Noriaki Kurokawa and Fumihiko Maki from Japan, and Atelier 5 from Switzerland) —the jury decided to commission a part of each competition entry to test the proposals in reality. The executed experimental neighborhood, resembling European Werkbund's realizations from the 1920s and 1930s, comprised 500 houses built on a 40 hectare site in a new district of Lima, eight kilometers from the city center. Although the realization of sample dwellings was supposed to lead to a selection of the most suitable

FIG. 1 / P. 25

FIG. 2 / P. 24

4 Ibid., p. 188.

5 See Aldo van Eyck, "Who Are We Building for, and Why?," in ibid., p. 189.

6 The complete team is listed in Oskar Hansen, Svein Hatløy, "Modelowy projekt taniego osiedla mieszkaniowego w Limie (Peru)," *Architektura*, no. 3, 1971, p. 107.

one and its replication in a large scale in the city, the project did not result in its continuation. The germ of Peruvian LCS ended in the form of six houses that, greatly redesigned by their users, remain in Lima.[7]

7 The houses built according to Hansen and Hatløy's design can be seen in a film accompanying Justin McCuirk's article in the Internet edition of *Domus*, see Justin McCuirck, "PREVI: the Metabolist Utopia," www.domusweb.it, published on 21 April 2011.