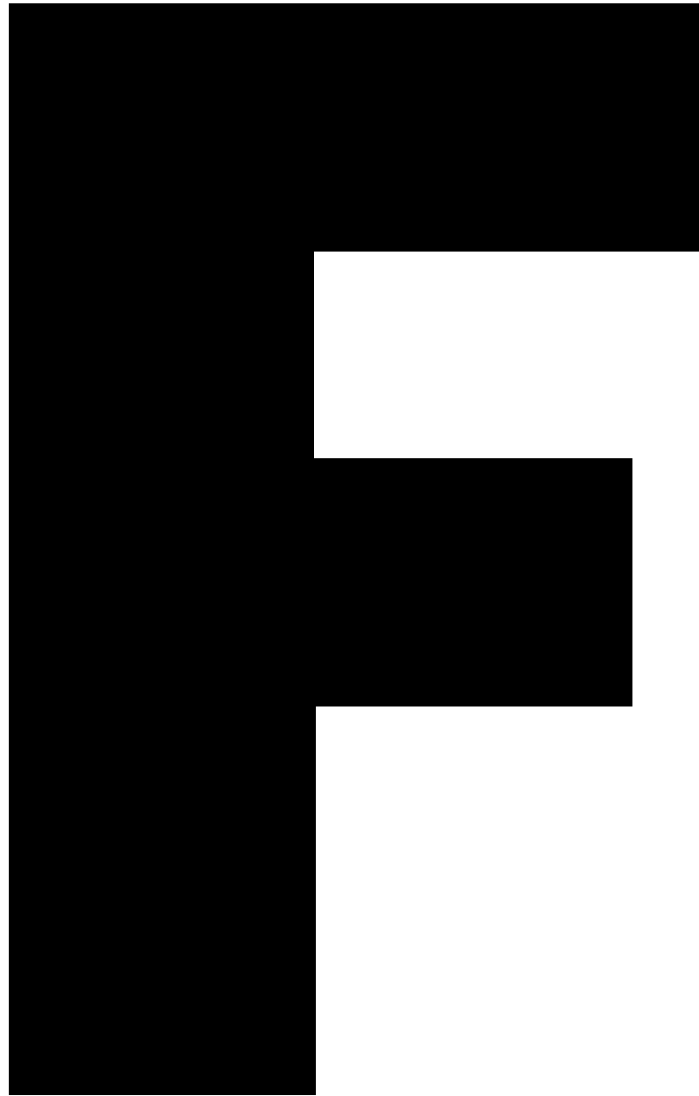


REAL ESTATE

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PROPERTY IN THE PERPETUAL PRESENT

The Chilean-born artist, architect, experimental filmmaker and video artist, Juan Downey, was peripatetic in his production, spending most of the 1970s traveling in between North and South America making para-anthropological videos, most notably developed in his renowned travelogue, *Video Trans Americas* (1973–76), a video expedition intended to record (with his own Sony Portapak) the different cultures living side by side on the American continents. In Downey’s own words: “Many of the cultures of the Americas exist today in total isolation, unaware of their overall variety and commonly shared myths. This automobile trip was designed to develop an encompassing perspective among the various populations that today inhabit the American continents, by means of a videotaped account... The role of the artist is here conceived to be a cultural communicant, an activating anthropologist with visual means of expression: videotape.” Following his interest and commitment to cybernetic theory and topology, as was evident in his early electronic and video sculptures of the 1960s, this trip—and the tapes that would be produced—was an experimental application of video as the cybernetic tool for empathetic communication among different cultures.

During this period, Downey spent a year documenting and living with the Yanomami, a diverse (and nationless) people who have inhabited an area of the Amazon jungle in bordering southern Venezuela and northern Brazil for an estimated 15,000 years. Although the Yanomami are a diverse group, who are made up of different tribes and villages who also speak different varieties of an isolate language, for the most part they share the same type of housing, dwelling in *shabonos*: communal structures that expand and contract according to the population of the tribe (the size of the shabono varies to hold between 50 and 400 occupants). The shabono is a single-story, shared-roof elliptical form in which the roofed outer ring constitutes the private and domestic living quarters of the community, and the open-air center holds its communal and ritualistic life. Using organic materials readily sourced from the surrounding jungle, the shelter is built by hand with branches and tree trunks, leaves, and vines. When a community has a reason to vacate (depleted natural resources in the area, natural disasters, or feuds with neighboring tribes, etc), the Yanomami abandon their communal dwelling to move to a new area of the rainforest, and the structure is swiftly re-absorbed, organically consumed by the jungle again. A shabono is never re-used—if another Yanomami tribe happens upon a previously constructed shabono, they leave it unoccupied.

This form of housing is obviously in stark contrast to western industrial society, and especially urban housing, which uses industrialized, processed materials to construct permanent and semi-permanent edifices, meant to house hundreds, if not thousands of people originating from and identifying as different communities, who use the shelter for different, individualist purposes. In our society, houses and apartment units are built with the idea that different people will inhabit them over time; even intergenerational inheritance is increasingly rare as real estate is the primary form of wealth accumulation for the middle class and the exchange value generally supersedes any other form of attachment with the space. When one unit is vacated by a person or group of people, another person or group of people will move in,

bringing their own furniture, objects, lives and histories. An especially post-industrialist phenomenon is the concept of loft-living, wherein a vacant edifice constructed for commercial or industrial purposes (such as a factory, or a wholesale department store) is converted for residential purposes. Loft-living often originates with artists (after moving to New York in 1969, Downey lived in a loft), who comprise the communities associated with developing these units, and later the neighborhoods around them; the first catalyzers of gentrification.

To compare the Yanomami shabono with the cosmopolitan loft allows a study of permanence versus impermanence: how a community adapts its architecture to its culture, and how a culture shifts to adapt to its architecture. In the Yanomami culture, the structure of a shabono is an unchanging constant, even if its location is always shifting geographically. In contrast, the structure of residential property in western society is variable as per capital distribution where the industrialist spaces of yesteryear are the trophy properties of the glitterati today; take for example art collectors Christian and Karen Boros¹ and Mera and Donald Rubell,² or supermodel Emily Ratajowski and her Hollywood-producer husband Sebastian Bear-McClard,³ who glamorize and glorify the once substandard (even inhumane) histories of the buildings themselves in a roll-my-sleeves fixer-upper spectacle.

However, before being co-opted by millionaires who proclaim to patronize the culture industry, some of these industrial spaces and lofts⁴ were developed, even colonized, by artists as live-work spaces. In New York City, 1961, artists began to join together as the Artist Tenants Association to petition for the legal right to live and work in loft spaces even though they were zoned for industrial use, driven by the argument that these abandoned spaces were undesirable for an average residential tenant and that affordable housing for artists would vitalize the culture of the city.⁵ Their continued advocacy eventually led to the passing of the New York State Multiple Dwelling Law, and in 1982, the artists’ Loft Law, with article 7-B permitting “certified artists”⁶ to occupy joint living-work quarters in a loft, commercial, or manufactured building, a law designed to protect the tenants in these substandard conditions from being evicted or vulnerable to significant increases in rent.

Of particular note are the Fluxhouses that were developed by artist and Fluxus founder George Macuinias in the late 1960s in SoHo. Loans from the National Foundation for the Arts and the Kaplan Foundation helped Macuinias’ to first purchase 80 Wooster Street⁷ in 1967, converting it into cooperative housing for artists; this was the first of several such buildings he invested in, for community-building and art-making alike. In Macuinias’ 1963 manifesto, titled *A Fluxhouse Plan for an Artist Condominium in New York City*, he laments that “the scarcity of economical working space is part of the general problem arising from urban obsolescence and decay [which continue] without obstruction... There are many buildings [...] that are architecturally sound and potentially valuable if considered from the point of view of radically altered use.” In many ways, Macuinias’ own personal investment in permanent real estate was a form of activism that proceeds from Asger Jorn’s creed a decade beforehand, that stated “experimental artists must get hold of industrial means and subject them to their own non-utilitarian ends.”⁸ Macuinias’ radical advocacy for live-work rights of artists in New York City led to the development of the Loft Law, and article 7-B, which continues to protect many artists today, enabling their artistic practice and experimental explorations.⁹ One of many ironies here is that this

insurance has been granted by an artist who formed Fluxus, a practice rooted in impermanence.¹⁰

While the commercial or residential tenants of an industrial loft in New York City may continue to change, using its structure for different (and perhaps exploitative) purposes, the Yanomami and their shabono is always on the move, yet, the basics of the shabono structure and how the community inhabits it always remains the same: a sort of permanent impermanence that negates the concept of progress or change. In contrast, throughout contemporary urban planning, we witness so many failed structures that were imagined for permanent use, which have not adapted to our needs. Take New York’s Grand Central or Penn Station for example, which once served a specific function and now can no longer adapt to its overwhelming capacity, yet we retain our use of it out of a duty of nostalgia or preservation (for the former) or out of an inability to adapt in real time (the latter).¹¹

In Downey’s video *The Abandoned Shabono* (1978), which documents the Yanomami’s shabono culture, his voice-as-narrator explains:

There is perhaps, besides the opposition between permanence and non-permanence, an underlying opposition that is more important: the one between a central power constructed around permanence as opposed to a society that rejects central power and at the same time refuses permanence.

Even though Fluxus—as a movement—rejected permanence (and even an agreed upon definition of its own name), Macuinias simultaneously recognized the need to create permanent, protected realty for artists to experiment with a practice of impermanence, or

continuous change.¹² A further permanence here is the possibility of capital accumulation for artists who produce non-marketable and time-based experimental work (those who subscribed to the Fluxus attitude believed in the artistic practice over the artistic product). In the urban jungle, the need for permanent space in which to affect change is vital: in a mega-city that continues to build exponentially on top of itself, with vacant skyscrapers inching up towards the sky, a sustainable environment to protect our nationless artists is crucial.

Downey closes the video, a meditation on an ancient culture imminently jeopardized by industrialist greed, with parting words:

The Yanomami culture exists not only through the vigilance of shamans within the wonderfully adaptable skin of their shabonos. Within historical memory, the Yanomami retreated from their enemies behind the rapids of the Amazon, where civilization was not interested in going. Not interested in going until geologists discovered useful minerals in this part of the world. The future of the Yanomami culture is uncertain, for they cannot combat the spirits of the industrial world, the need for resources and technological society’s insistence on remaking the world in its own image. •

¹ Christian and Karen Boros purchased ‘der Bunker’ in Berlin in 2003, converting the World War II era air-raid shelter into a home for their collection of global contemporary art. Der Bunker was originally constructed in 1943 by Nazis to shelter forcibly displaced Jews condemned to board the Reichsbahn train, bringing them to another form of forced—so called—shelter in concentration camps.

² The Rubells are the celebrated owners of one of the largest and most extensive private contemporary art collections in North America, which they housed in the Wynwood District of Miami from 1993 until 2019 in a former Drug Enforcement Administration warehouse, a storage facility for cocaine and cash seized from drug dealers during the armed conflicts of the 1970s and 80s between the United States government and multiple drug cartels, primarily the Medellín Cartel.

³ Ratajowski and Bear-McClard have recently been condemned in the press for withholding years of rent to the landlord of their Greenwich Village loft, the lease for which Bear-McClard had supposedly benefited as a hand-me-down from his artist parents Michael McClard and Liza Béar (co-founder of art magazines *Avalanche* and *Bomb*).

⁴ For the purposes of this article, the focus is on lofts of New York City.

⁵ John Lindsay, New York City’s mayor at the time, agreed, expressing that allowing artists to develop the SoHo district would “insure New York’s position as the art capital of the nation and one of the great creative centers of the world.”

⁶ 7-B states the definition of “artist” as “a person who is regularly engaged in the fine arts, such as painting and sculpture or in the performing or creative arts, including choreography and filmmaking, or in the composition of music on a professional basis, and is so certified by the city department of cultural affairs and/or state council on the arts.” <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/buildings/pdf/MultipleDwellingLaw.pdf>

⁷ The massive building located at 80 Wooster Street was originally constructed in 1895 as a warehouse, and was occupied through the mid-portion of the 20th Century by the Miller Paper Company.

⁸ Notes on the Formation of an Imaginist Bauhaus, 1957.

⁹ The Yanomami people are a society without a state, but in the United States the state mandates what type of living is for what type of people. In fact, in New York City, Macuinias’ work eventually forced the state of New York to define what an artist is (see footnote 6).

¹⁰ In further irony, fifty years later, the Soho district is widely considered to be one of the most luxurious parts of town, home to a high-density of luxury good commercial storefronts and boutiques, whose current residents report a median income that is nearly twice that of an average American, and twelve times that of an average global citizen. An apartment at 80 Wooster Street, on the second floor, is currently listed for sale for \$2.4 million; the broker additionally lists the commercial unit on the garden level that may allow for a “truly ideal SoHo Live-Work experience.” Although the Loft Law and Article 7-B were developed in order to benefit artists and protect those in need, there are sadly many who currently live in and occupy these spaces who ride the coattails of the artists who—sacrificing a great deal—pioneered the neighborhood. Furthermore, the ground floor unit of 80 Wooster Street, which originally housed Jonas Mekas’ New York Filmmakers Cinematheque, is currently occupied by the commercial tenant, the RealReal, an “online and brick-and-mortar marketplace for authenticated luxury consignment,” a company who proclaims that they collectively “empower consignors and buyers to extend the life cycle of luxury goods. The future of fashion is circular.” The ironies here multiply, like in a hall of mirrors.

¹¹ Here, we forgo the discussion about the continuous and rapid raising, demolition, and down-sizing that occurs throughout industrial society. For further discussion, see Keller Easterling’s *Substraction* (Sternberg, 2014).

¹² Macuinias’ manifesto references Fluxus as a “continuous moving on or passing by, as of a flowing stream; a continuing succession of changes.”