In “The Pit”: Lima’s Anti-Architecture of Modernity

by Dr. Daniella Candolfo

In downtown Lima, two structures are in intimate proximity and worlds apart. One is the modernist tower of the Judiciary, erected in 1954. The other is the infamous, below-ground market of “El Hueco”—or “The Pit”—sitting defiantly in the Judiciary’s shadow. At El Hueco, around 1,500 vendors sell contraband, brand-forged, and pirated goods mixed in with perfectly legitimate merchandize like shoes and clothes. Besides their adjacency, the two sites are connected by the fact that the corners where they are located at a central intersection of downtown were once envisioned jointly as part of an urban modernization project that was never finished. What does the history of these built environments tell us about the current legal, aesthetic, and political challenge that El Hueco poses to state rationality? Against the formal or formalizing will of modernist architecture, El Hueco and its history are a disturbing and debasing affront to any aspirations of architectural composition and control.

Dr. Candolfo teaches anthropology at Wesleyan University. Her first book, The City at its Limits: Taboo, Transgression, and Urban Renewal in Lima (U Chicago Press 2009), is an ethnography of home at a time of political repression and urban reconstruction. Her new book project is about poorly regulated urban markets and the deforming power they have over bourgeois ideals of urban development and bureaucratic form.