

Love in the ruins

James Mumford visits the tenth circle of hell — a Spanish shanty town for drug addicts — and finds hope there

On the outskirts of Madrid, on the other side of the M40 from the terracotta tower blocks of Spanish suburbia, there is a place locals refer to as Baranquilla. It translates, 'a small chasm or cliff'. Once a rubbish dump, it is now Spain's premiere heroin pick-up point.

You can tell which exit to take from the M40 by the dribbling trail of pedestrians and a long line of vehicles. The cars are a curious mixture of old bangers and pristine Mercedes. We are in an old van. We make our way past sunburnt pilgrims, heads down, eyes fixed before feet. Each pilgrim carries a plastic bag.

Baranquilla is difficult to describe. It is at once a marketplace and a tip, a gypsy camp and a pleasure palace. There is a

sprawling proliferation of ramshackle properties: brick shacks which are the mere shells of buildings, separated only by fences made from mattress-springs. On one side there is a railway line; on another is the wall of Madrid's car pound, its top coated with barbed wire. Dozens of people sit in the shade of the wall. Further down the valley there is a gypsy camp, and beyond, marking the boundary of the camp, two mountains of rubbish with a veneer of dry grass.

We disembark from our van, stepping out on to a carpet of used needles and flattened beer cans (the aluminium of which is an essential piece of kit). A hot breeze sweeps the sand. There isn't much noise except for the cries of men selling accessories: 'Chuta! Plata!' (Syringes! Silver!). I see a man of maybe 60 sink a syringe into the inside of his left arm. Then he nurses it like a child.

This is the tenth circle of hell. The van which has ferried me here belongs to Betel, a church-based drug rehabilitation centre. There are only a few external agencies brave enough to enter Baranquilla: the police and Betel. For 20 years Betel has shipped thousands of men and women from Baranquilla to its safe houses, where they are cared for, helped through cold turkey and given a job.

Manolo is driving the van today. He left Baranquilla and gave up drugs four years ago, but returns every afternoon of the year. Flinging the van's back doors wide open, he gives yogurt and cakes to anyone who wants them. For many this snack is the staple diet. As a crowd gathers at the back of the van, Manolo's eyes shine with both compassion and anger. I watch as he pleads with one person to leave Baranquilla, but the man refuses. He says he doesn't want to sign up for a programme with fixed procedures (i.e., no drugs). 'I am free here,' he declares. Manolo replies, 'You see that rat? He's freer than you are.' And then, in an aside to me, 'This place is run by the Father of Lies. We bring the truth in here. And it leaves with us.'

Baranquilla begins to remind me of Ben Hur's leper colony, the place from which a grim-faced Charlton Heston retrieves his forsaken mother and sister. That outcast place was accessible only by basket. Baranquilla, however, is accessible by BMW. They are driven by the 'recreational' users. In their quest for what addicts rever-

ently refer to as 'Lady Heroin' the BMWs pull up alongside junk automobiles with cracked windshields, heavily indented bonnets and vacant side-windows.

The Timberland-booted BMW drivers are in and out quickly. They look out of place among the roughshod, tank-topped majority who are for the most part extremely emaciated, like El Greco figures. One especially harrowing example approaches the van. His face is sunken, his cheekbones pronounced. He has no chin to speak of. He is, as Hamlet would have it, quite chop-fallen. The open shirt of another poor creature reveals a blood stain which has gathered around a small slit in his throat. Searching hopelessly for a vein, he has resorted to injecting straight into his neck. The wound hasn't healed because his blood lacks coagulating agents (i.e., iron) necessary for scabbing. Conditions here, unsurprisingly, are far from sanitary. Manolo relates the story of an old neighbour who had been bitten by one of the many rats. Within days his head had swollen to three times its size. Within a week he was dead.

There are children here too. I see one toddler bouncing obliviously on the back seat of a truck. 'Why do the authorities not intervene?' I ask. Because only social services, not the police, are authorised to take children from their parents, is the answer. Social services never set foot in the place.

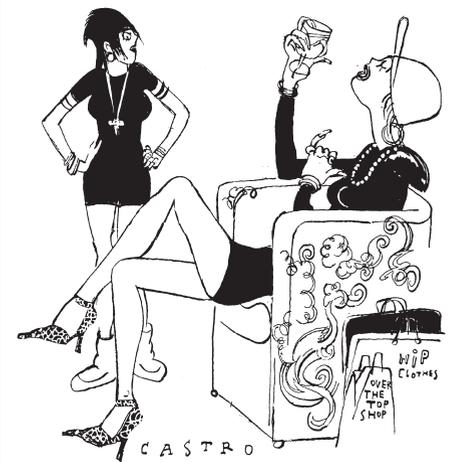
What I can't stop wondering is why such flagrant drug activity is allowed. I can't imagine any equivalent sites on the outskirts of London. The only cries I've heard in Hampstead village are 'Strawberries!



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Three for a pound!' But Baranquilla is approved by the government as part of a campaign to confine hard-drug activity to a remote region out of harm's way. You hear the purring of police cars all over the site. The law patrols Baranquilla to prevent outbreaks of violence, and to carry away the bodies of the two or three addicts who overdose each week. But it is not just those that overdose who die. No one who attempts to cheat the salesmen or steal heroin will leave alive.

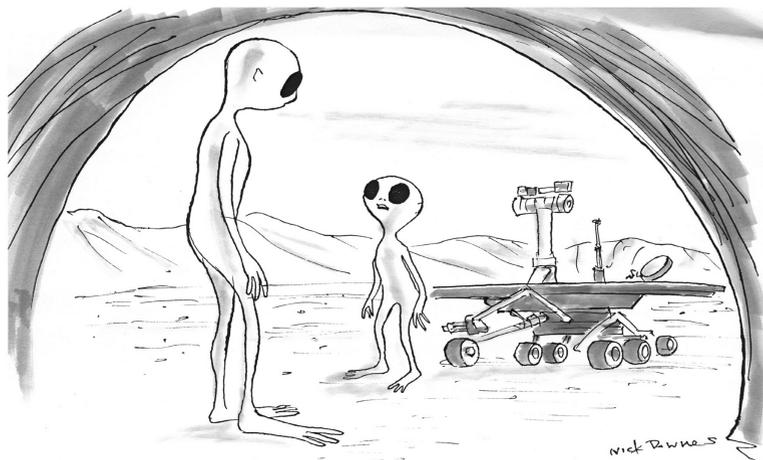
There used to be four other puntos — Celsa, Torregrosa, Los Pitufos, Pers Negores — but their inhabitants have been transferred to Baranquilla. When they tore down the settlements in Celsa, Manolo tells me, many bodies were found in the gaps between the walls of the shacks. He bends down to draw a diagram in the sand: two adjacent lines, and in between them a stick man. The bodies had been soaked in lime so their flesh corroded. Only their bone structure was left. I pinch myself to remember that this is the West. It seems like another world, a world to which I send my money via flashing numbers at the bottom of the television screen.

I am reminded of Joseph Conrad's descriptions of the black chain gang forced to build a Congo railway for the Belgian Trade Company. The place the Polish writer understands as the heart of darkness — the shady grove of 'mournful stillness' — is uncannily like Baranquilla. 'They were dying slowly — it was very clear. . . they were nothing earthly now — nothing but shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. . . these moribund shapes were as free as air and nearly as thin.' But that was 19th-century colonialism, not 21st-century socialist Spain, not liberal Europe, not the free world.

Even in the UK, however, 35 per cent of young men and 24 per cent of young women have taken an illicit substance within the past year. (And it's not all cannabis: class A drugs accounted for 12 per cent of use among young men.) Most Britons who take drugs are recreational users, but Baranquilla shows us where recreational use can lead. 'They all begin as recreational users,' says one Betel worker as we watch an addict pick up used but resaleable needles.

Yet it's not all doom and gloom. Betel (the Spanish for the Hebrew 'Bethel', meaning House of God) has seen more than 75,000 addicts come through its doors since it was founded by Elliot Tepper in 1985. Tepper, 58, is an American, a Cambridge graduate, a Harvard MBA and a professor of economics. But while some of his classmates are billionaires, Mr and Mrs Tepper live in rented accommodation in one of Madrid's most impoverished neighbourhoods.

Arriving in Spain as members of the Worldwide Evangelisation for Christ, founded by the English cricketer and Chinese missionary C.T. Studd, the Teppers could no longer bear the devastat-



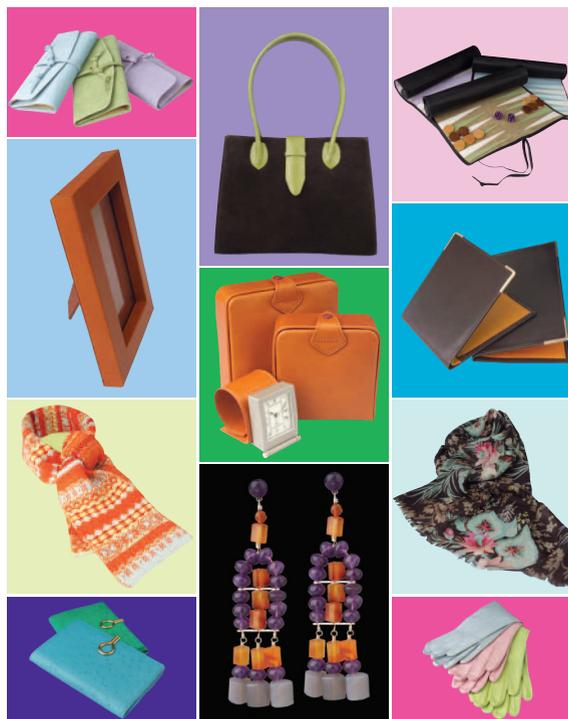
'It followed me home! Can I keep it?'

ing school-run sights of men injecting heroin. So they built up Betel, house by house. Tepper funds 96 per cent of the enormous costs of running the centre through small businesses — import/export/furniture-making/gardening — in which ex-addicts find initial occupation. Tepper also established Betel as a church whose priests are all recovering addicts in the programme. In 1993 Betel went international. Tepper set up rehab houses in Italy and the US and now it operates in 12 countries outside Spain. At present there are 737 people in Spain and 627 internationally who wouldn't be coming off drugs

if it wasn't for Tepper's refusal to give up.

In the Thyssen-Bornemisza museum in Madrid there is a painting by Marc Chagall, 'The Virgin of the Village'. High above the muddy conurbation, a man with flowers and angels with trumpets float free in a soft sky. Months before his Aids-related death, Raul Casto, Betel's first liberated addict and first indigenous priest, was asked to account for the 'ecstatic' behaviour, jubilant hymn-singing, abandoned dancing, etc., so unseemly in the eyes of the sophisticated West and so common to Betel's worship services. 'We dance because we cannot fly,' he explained.

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