



## ON THE UNFINISHED by ARQUITECTURA-G

Conversation with Nolaster and Ekhi Lopetegui

All photographs courtesy of Jan Bitter

Interior design magazines tend to be the perfect setting for degrading architecture into something mediocre. In the name of decorators and interior designers, architecture is painted up and disguised to become just another piece in a vulgar game.

Architecture is everything. In other words, it is understood as a whole, as a process involving many factors, one of which is time. Time in which the architect gives way to habitation, time in which the house ages, deteriorates, and lends itself to future changes. With that, contemporary architecture has by no means found a problem but rather one of its greatest virtues.

When Arquitectura-G was asked to contribute to the magazine (which we offer a warm welcome to), we were pleased to see the point of view it expressed, where the paramount element was the way the people appropriate spaces, while staying away from the ridiculous focusing on mountains as seen in cheap design magazines and vases framed in uninspired, substandard photos.

To discuss these topics, we begin a conversation with the budding Madrid-based studio Nolaster Architects, with the centerpiece being Casa OS, a creation of theirs in Loreda, Cantabria (Spain).

A single-family dwelling built in a privileged location on the edge of a cliff overlooking the Bay of Biscay. A house of undeniable quality that brings new approaches and with them, spaces for disagreement and discussion. A house that allows us to talk about architecture, time and habitation.

We know that words are not the stuff of architects; we use images and communicate through those. That is why we felt it was necessary to bring in someone from outside the world of architecture, who could keep it from being a conversation for architects only and fuse all the pieces together. This is where I come in: Ekhi Lopetegui, a young man member of the rock band Delorean and PhD student at the University of Barcelona.

We present the topic of debate for this issue by way of an Adolf Loos text, along with the complete series of correspondence that we have exchanged (below).

## Adolf Loos: Story of a poor rich man

In: Adolf Loos: *Ins Leere gesprochen. 1897-1900.*

New edition Vienna 1987, pub. By Adolf Opel (first in: *Neues Wiener Tagblatt*, 26 April 1900)

Translated from the German by Stefanie Doerper

I want to tell you about a poor rich man. He had money and a good, faithful wife who kissed away from his forehead the sorrows his business brought with it, and he had a band of children even his poorest worker would have been envious of. His friends loved him because whatever he touched prospered. But today everything has changed completely. This is how it happened: One day this man said to himself: You have wealth and possessions, a faithful wife and children your poorest worker would be envious of. But are you really happy? Look, there are people who lack everything that you are envious of. But their sorrows are chased away by a great sorceress, art. And what is art to you? You don't even know her by name. Every dandy can hand in his visiting card and your servant opens the folding doors. But you have never received art at your home. I know for certain that she doesn't come. But I will call on her. She shall enter like a queen and live with me. He was a strong man, whatever he handled was done with dashing energy. That's what people were used to from his businesses. And so he went the very same day to see a famous architect and told him: "Bring art to me, into my four walls. Don't spare any expense."

The architect didn't need to be told twice. He went to the rich man's house, threw out all his furniture, had an army of floor layers, varnishers, masons, house painters, carpenters, plumbers, potters, carpet layers, painters and sculptors move in and whoosh, before you could turn around, art was captured, boxed, safely kept inside the rich man's four walls.

The rich man was overjoyed. Overjoyed he walked through the new rooms. Wherever he looked there was art, art in all and everything. He touched art when turning a latch, he sat on art when sitting in an armchair, he buried his head in art when burying it exhaustedly in the pillow, his foot sank into art when striding upon the carpets. He indulged himself fervently in art. Since his plate was imbued with artistic décor he cut his *boeuf à l'oignon* in two with double strength.

He was praised, he was envied. The art magazines glorified his name as one of the greatest in the kingdom of patrons, his rooms became a paragon and were represented, exemplified and explained.

But they also deserved it. Each room formed a cohesive symphony of colours. Wall, furniture and drapery were attuned in the most sophisticated way. Each utensil had its precise location and was connected to the others in the most wonderful combinations. Nothing, not one thing had been forgotten by the architect. Ashtrays, cutlery, light extinguishers, everything, every thing had been combined by him. But it wasn't a matter of the common skills of an architect, no, each ornament, each form, each nail expressed the individuality of its owner. (A psychological effort whose difficulty should be obvious to everyone.)

The architect, however, humbly put down all the honours. Because, he said, these rooms are not mine. Namely, over in that corner stands a statue by Charpentier. And as much as I would resent anybody passing a room off as his design when he, for example, only used one of my door latches, so little would I dare calling this room my intellectual property. This was spoken nobly and consistently. Many a carpenter, who may have equipped his room with a wall paper by Walter Crane, but wanted to attribute the furniture to himself, because he had invented and crafted it, felt ashamed up into the darkest depths of his black soul when learning these words.

Let's return to our rich man after this deviation. I already mentioned how happy he was. From now on he dedicated a great part of his time to the study of his home. Because this is something that has to be learnt, as he soon realized. There was so much to keep in mind. Every utensil had its appointed location. The architect had given him his all. He had thought of everything beforehand. The tiniest box had its exact space that was especially made for it.

His home was comfortable, but it strained the mind very much. Thus, the architect controlled the inhabitation during the first weeks, so no mistake occurred. The rich man tried his best, but it happened that he put down a book and, absorbed in thought, positioned it in the compartment that was prepared for newspapers. Or that he knocked off the ashes of his cigar in the cavity of the table that was meant for the candleholder. Once having taken something into ones hands one wouldn't stop guessing and searching for its old position, and sometimes the architect had to unroll the detail drawings to recover the space for a matchbox.

Where applied arts celebrated such triumphs, applied music couldn't stay behind. The rich man was very concerned with this idea. He made a request at the tram company asking to replace their witless chime with the chime motif of Parsifal. However, the company would not accommodate him. They weren't yet receptive enough to modern ideas. Instead they allowed him to have the paving in front of his house executed at his own expense, through which every

cart was forced to pass to the rhythm of the Radetzky March. The electric chimes in his rooms played Wagner and Beethoven tunes and all qualified art critics praised the man who had disclosed a new field for "the art in objects of utility".

One can imagine that all these improvements made the man even happier. But it shouldn't be concealed that he preferred to be at home as little as possible. Well, you would want to have a rest from so much art from time to time. Or could you live in an art gallery? Or sit in "Tristan and Isolde" for months? Now then! Who would hold it against him if he renewed his strengths for his home in cafés, in restaurants or at the homes of friends and acquaintances? He had imagined things to be different. But sacrifices have to be made for art. He had already made so many. His eyes got teary. He commemorated many old things that he had loved so much and that he missed sometimes. The big recliner! His father had always had a nap after lunch in it. The old clock! And the pictures! But art asked for it! Don't soften!

Once it happened that he celebrated his birthday. His wife and children had made him many presents. He liked the objects very much and they gave him a lot of pleasure. Soon after that the architect came to see if everything was well and to make decisions about difficult issues. He entered the room. The master of the house walked joyfully towards him because there were many things he wished to discuss. But the architect didn't see his host's joy. He had detected something completely different and turned pale: "What kind of slippers are you wearing" he spluttered with effort.

The man looked at his embroidered slippers. He breathed a sigh of relief. This time he felt entirely innocent because the shoes had been fabricated after an original design by the architect. Hence he answered with superiority:

"Why, Mr. Architect! Did you already forget? These shoes were designed by you!"

"Sure", the architect roared, "but for the bedroom. But you disrupt with these two obnoxious coloured stains the entire mood. Do you fail to see that?"

The man did see that. He quickly took off his slippers and was really glad that the architect didn't think that his stockings were obnoxious. They went into the bedroom where the rich man was allowed to put on his slippers again.

"Yesterday", he began tentatively, "I celebrated my birthday. My loved ones lavished me with presents. I let you call, dear Mr. Architect, so you could give us advice on the best way to arrange the presents."

The architect's face elongated noticeably. Then he broke out:

"How dare you let anybody make you gifts? Didn't I design everything for you? Didn't I consider everything? You don't need anything else. You are complete!"

"But", the host took the liberty of replying, "I am still allowed to buy something for me!"

"No, you are not! Never and under no circumstances! That's the last thing I needed! Objects that are not designed by me? Didn't I go far enough when I allowed you to have the Charpentier? The statue that took all the reputation I deserved for my work away from me? No, you are not allowed to buy anything anymore!"

"But when my grandson presents me with something he made at the kindergarten?"

"Then you must not take it!"

The master of the house was devastated. But he hadn't lost yet. An idea, yes, an idea!

"And if I wanted to buy a picture at the Secession?" he asked triumphantly.

"Then try to hang it somewhere. Don't you see that there is no space left for anything? Don't you see that I have also composed a frame directly on the wall for each picture that I have hung here for you? You can't even move a picture. Try it, try to place a new picture."

At that moment something changed in the rich man. The happy man felt all of a sudden deeply miserable. He saw his future life. Nobody was allowed to give him pleasure. He would have to pass by the shops of this city without desiring anything. For him nothing would be produced anymore. None of his loved ones would be allowed to present him with his picture, for him there were no painters anymore, no artists, no craftsmen. He was cut off from future life and aspirations, becoming and wishing. He felt: Now it's all about learning how to cope with one's own corpse. Exactly! He is finished. He is complete.

**ARQUITECTURA-G**

Lifestyles today are such that flexibility—defined as functionality that is not subject to strict rules, dogmas or hindrances—is an essential condition when reflecting on the contemporary home. Adolf Loos was already onto this back in 1900.

People must be free to appropriate their living space in a way that is pleasing to them. That said, the hierarchical distribution of uses enslaves the user inasmuch as it proffers but one way of inhabiting that space. Thus, a flexible space is one that accommodates any form of habitation.

The order, or lack thereof, ought to come from the inhabitant (the Nemausus housing project by Jean Nouvel), and not the architecture itself (renovation of an apartment on Barcelona's Carrer dels Mercaders by Enric Miralles). Actually, it should be the architecture that allows for disorder and not vice versa.

The requirements for a variation of 2 to 30 inhabitants, as well as the uncertainty of the program for Casa OS, opened the door to reflection on flexibility. Reflecting on something and arriving at an outcome, turning thought into something material, is a way of determining that idea, and something that is determined is the opposite of flexible. That way, we could run into the setback of total, perfect flexibility, where the architect's work is essentially nullified.

Can flexibility be planned?

**EKHI LOPETEGUI**

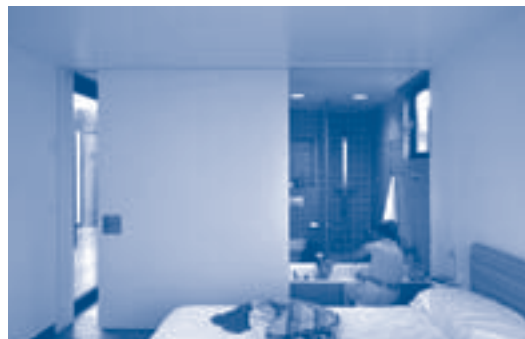
Casa OS immediately lends itself to be compared, contrasted with the house of "The Poor Rich Man" described by Loos. Why? Because it is the opposite of Casa OS, which was made by taking uncertainty (the indeterminacy of space) as the backbone. This is due to the complexity of a program that requires maximum organization and exploitation of the variability factor. The zero degree of that project, then, is variability, with the "constants" (spaces whose uncertainty equals zero) being an adjacent effect, but never the underpinnings for the project.

Quite the opposite of the house of the "rich man," which exemplifies ultracodification, ultradetermination and the saturation of space. I'm saying "ultra" not to use a buzz prefix, but because in the Loos text we're presented with the exact same limit for the determined, and the codification of a space. We could call it the Planning limit. In an exaggerated, caricaturesque manner, it exemplifies what the architect has been: meaning, the one who has predetermined the uses of a space, the one who—as if it were about some ferocious Grammar—has prescribed the possibilities for inhabiting a space, and using it freely. But this architect-Despot figure comes crumbling down: first, because his failure is inscribed in the very logic of habitation, given that upon inhabiting it is inherent to him to exceed the limits and conditions on using habitable space; and second, because in postmodern societies flexibility (uncertainty) is not the exception but in fact the rule, and it agrees with the way that precarious lifestyles are composed.

"Casa OS has ended up being defined as a field of multiple-choice encounters." My guess is that this is so because there was an understanding of what the variability of uses is all about. The rich man's architect would have upped the level of determination in response to the complexity of the program, adding details and, if possible, further determining the space. Casa OS responds in an opposite manner: *the architect withdraws* in order to concede a free space. How? By contemplating the task as one of infrastructural articulation of the house, or in other words, smoothing down the space for it to be simply (within the realm of possibilities) *a surface*

*that supports the complexity of uses.* In comparison with the silly postmodernism that adds complexity by creating taut spaces and glorifying spatial confusion (Loos' architect, or Venturi), the response to complexity is understood as the conferral of a space that is indeterminate, uncertain, plain and, ultimately, free. It comes as no surprise that the organizational logic of the house be the "simple addition of basic spaces."

There is this whole consideration of emptiness here. It's not only the space that gets emptied (of determinations), but the user profile as well: Who inhabits this space? Who has it been conferred to? To anyone, obviously. The user profile is as obsolete as the profile for spaces in a home. In a sense, the kitchen has ceased to be a space with distinguishing features and is now a space of "zero uncertainty" (this does not



eliminate the need for a kitchen sink). As relates to the uncertainty (determinability of space) a relational space is organized where what is important are the differences in degree and intensity of use, not the differences in fixed 'identities' (determinations or fixations of the use of a space, or of its possibilities). In that sense, the empty, plain or free space supports gradual differences and variable relationships according to intensity-of-use criteria.

To answer the question: flexibility is not planned; it is reducing the plan to the minimum, that is, understanding that the response to uncertainty involved amounts to the infrastructural planning of the home, which is now to be understood as a free surface that supports, meaning it should support the disorder inherent to all forms of habitation.

One final note: in my opinion, architects must know that this kind of reflection is nothing more than adapting to a context that transcends them, and this idea was already looked at by Constant and Archigram from a critical perspective, and while this may be the only decent position existing today, it is a "reactive" perspective.

Another final note: With respect to the withdrawal of the architect, another thing in play here is an ethical relationship with the medium of the home, and as a paradigmatic example of that, in Casa OS "no element built on the roof (chimneys, railings, etc.) goes beyond the horizon seen by a person positioned at street level."

**NOLASTER**

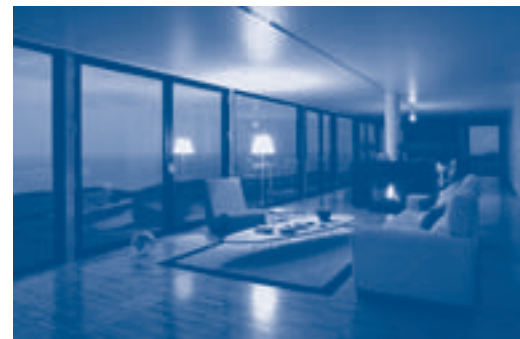
What's irritating about the architect of the poor rich man is not so much his desire to determine certain aspects of how the client's house is lived.

What's irritating is that this desire is extended to the entirety of all future possibilities.

Our job is full of decisions that determine in one way or another the way the inhabitants of our buildings will experience them. And that should not make our hands tremble.

At the same time, we are not interested in total flexibility. We haven't carried out our work in pursuit of a reflection on flexibility. We were aiming for a reflection on architecture. Can we plan an architecture that does not determine the entire realm of future possibilities? But we don't want this issue to eclipse our interest in determining, in specifying the present possibilities. In the house of the poor rich man, all of the possibilities are exhausted—all of them. But aren't many of the possibilities also exhausted in Casa OS?

We have discovered the importance of having a certain humility in our work: the user might discover richness that you are unaware of. Their form of habitation could continue the process of architectural creation that was frozen the day that construction was completed.



We would like to think that Casa OS is alive.  
It's incomplete!  
It's unfinished!

**ARQUITECTURA-G**

An architect has to make determinations and decisions... but can these be made with resignation? The humility you were talking about could be the consequence—just like flexibility is—of a game that transcends us.

So, as Ekhi paraphrased it, you are leaving Casa OS in a moment in which it is defined as a field of multiple-choice possibilities.

It's unfinished!  
It's alive

However, for architecture to be alive, it has to be inhabited, threshed, exploited in all of its variants, finite or infinite, and that habitation should behave like a gas, which occupies the total space and adapts to its changes. How would Casa OS be inhabited by 2 people? How can one get it to be unfinished, alive? The succession of rooms to end up in the longitudinal living room overlooking the sea, laid out linearly...are these not conducive to inhabiting only the contiguous spaces?

We do believe it is possible to make architecture without determining all of the future possibilities, being aware of the architect's "failure" in terms of the richness discovered by the inhabitant. When Nouvel kept the workers' wall drawings in Nemausus, that was nothing more than determining, crystallizing a decision and a moment in which the architect withdraws and gives way to habitation.

Failure understood as a nondefeat. At the same time, failure takes on a tragic beauty, one of material contrast with that which transcends us, just as Fitzcarraldo serenely smokes a cigar while listening to Caruso following his failure on the Pachitea. This is the grandeur associated with the contemporary architect.

You say that their form of habitation could continue the process of architectural creation that was frozen the day that

construction was completed. The house's ownership could change hands and accommodate the new way of living it via mechanisms that were determined by the architect. Could these mechanisms be an aspiration toward ownership (by the architect)?

Would this be fragmenting the house with one of these mechanisms?

**EKHI**

Hi, everyone. Well, here are my reflections: I think the best thing is for the response to come from architecture; I'm not questioning that those were your intentions, but sometimes the philosophical mumbo jumbo causes the rest to stumble on its own underpinnings.

First of all, I think that in order to clarify things, we should establish degree differences between certain concepts. Architecture's ceasing to be Determinative does not mean that architecture enters the realm of the Indeterminate. That's why you (Nolaster) write that, "we are not interested in total flexibility." In actuality, the idea of Total Flexibility is still fanciful, susceptible solely from a new age perspective like a "mystical bond with Nature" or something. That's why you both (AG and Nolaster) highlight that your job is full of decisions and determinations; in the end, making architecture is "making"—intervening on a material. Intervening, which is to say determining, shaping, delimiting the material in a sense. Thus, there are decisions and there is determination because there is architecture.

Nonetheless, we can consider the problem not to be one of Determination vs. Total Flexibility. In other words, we are not looking at the dilemma of being either "the rich man's architect" or "the shapeless flow one does with the material." What we can discuss is how is that which has been determined in each case, to what extent have the possibilities been exhausted, if the work is open and unfinished or not, what relationships are established with other non-architectural domains, etc.

I think there are a number of interrelated questions here. First, I think that as far as I see Casa OS, the work you all have done could be called "infrastructural." I don't know if that makes sense, or if you agree. In order to get the house to be unfinished, you've tried to have your intervention, your decisions (which there are), delimit a space that will work more like a support for the possible forms of habitation that may or may not populate the house someday. That is why it's unfinished, it's incomplete; it's a support. That work can be considered one of infrastructure (although not all infrastructure work must immediately be incomplete or open, perhaps it must with yours).

And it is true that this entails also a reflection on architecture, or a reflection that covers both flexibility and architecture, what that should or should not be, etc. That Decision affects you all as architects and it also affects you from an ethical-political perspective (in the lighter sense of these terms, if you like). The question—and here is where AG's comments intersect—is not this relative withdrawal of the architect, this position of humility, the effect of a "game that transcends the architect," the effect of a loss of centrality with the architecture and the architect? What unfettered Economy needs is a plain surface, unfinished works that can support, be a support for its vicissitudes—today it's storage, tomorrow a workshop or garden; likewise it needs living spaces with variable partition walls to accommodate a workforce (the inhabitants) exposed to its infinite variations, migrant workers today, families tomorrow and divorcees the day after that. In that sense, the architect—while we may not like this—is still

a subordinate, a human resources manager in the era of diabolical capitalism.

And this, by no means, is to say that Casa OS is solely that; “the house still to be done” will always be preferable to that of the “rich finished” one. I simply want to point out that if we are going to think or do some reflection on architecture, whether that be from the perspective of architecture itself or any other discipline, the question of the unfinished or incomplete, the open empty bucket that remains to be filled, is a bit more complex or ambivalent. In that sense, the question would be: what are the limitations of this kind of approaches, and what else could architecture be today than that mere act of conferring open spaces (which is no small contribution)? What the heck does making architecture mean (what’s the point) when both New Babylon or the Situationists and their Unitary Urbanism (coincidentally in vogue), Archigram’s engineering, and Oteiza’s empty boxes are the ideal model of that monstrous delirium that is postmodern society?

What I mean to say is that there is a sort of zero degree of architecture, as its primary condition, the acceptance that something transcends the architect and that architects have to confer space to that which transcends them (habitation, Economy); but that today this may not be enough, that perhaps it only serves to corroborate, repeat, redound in a unique reality or form of having things happen, as its perfect complement.

And this problem is not one that can be resolved under the cover of any tragic image.

#### ARQUITECTURA-G

Ekhi, you are absolutely right with respect the mumbo jumbo; in fact, it’s something we’ve discussed quite often, that we architects don’t know how to write and rarely seem to express ourselves without sounding either lyrical or lacking in words. Our medium is IMAGE and architecture is precisely that.

Years ago we attended a conference where an architect was whining about how he’d returned to see this housing project a year after it was built and the inhabitants had had destroyed his designs. His dismay seemed pathetic to us. When we were talking about tragic, far from an attempt at relying on lyricism, what we wanted was to express the idea of fleeing from that stance.

The floor plan for Casa OS suggests a number of things to us, though not so much an open support as Ekhi mentions. For that reason, and because we understand and explain things from an architectural perspective, we would like to know what relationships you’ve looked for among the rooms.

#### NOLASTER

Let’s start, as you suggested, from an architectural perspective, which is what we are trying to learn.

The Casa OS floor plan was supposed to respond to some very specific needs. The rooms soon took on some very specific dimensions [herein lies the determination]. Some of the rooms responded very specifically to some of the very specific needs. Others did not. In any case, all of them were conceived within a system. In that, the very specific dimensions of the rooms and the relationship between one another were perhaps more of a determining factor than the very specific needs of some. The system was looking for the relationships between rooms to be about “use” and not “perception,” such that the very specific needs of each piece could be “contaminated” with needs that had yet to be specified [herein lies the indeterminacy]. A relationship of “use” between two rooms is established with a door. The type of door defines the nuance

of that relationship. All the rooms are similar; there is a certain sensation of isotropy. The result is simple and complex all at once.

Let’s conclude from a non-architectural perspective. This is something we don’t know much about, though we feel we could try to say something.

We feel comfortable within that “game that transcends the architect.” We are in a peripheral discipline. Aren’t they all?

This condition seems positive to us and its acceptance is part of a realism (not a cynical one) that allows us to contribute what we have, and receive what they give us.

Isn’t that “enough”? “*There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*” (Hamlet, W. Shakespeare).

#### EKHI

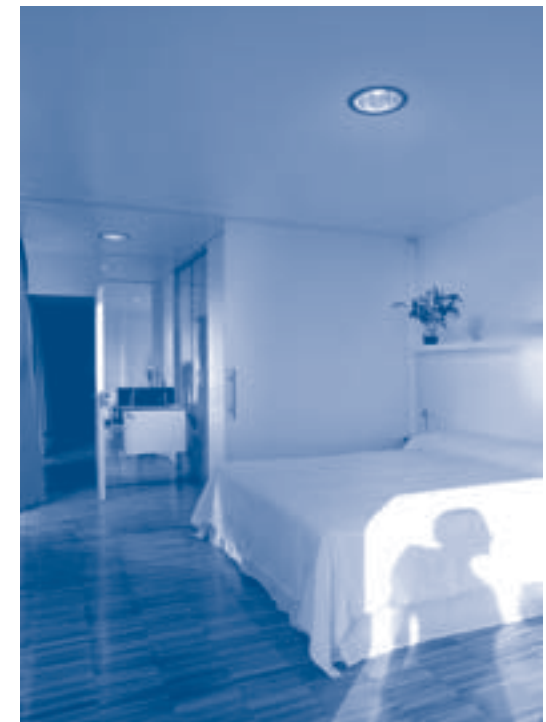
I think that technical questions can be clarified “from an architectural perspective” where with other peripheral perspectives they cannot, perhaps because they are explained differently, or perhaps a different set of nuances surrounding the same question are explained.

The relationships between the rooms are about “use”; the specification of a room depends on the level of specification of needs (for use) in the context of a system of relationships. The spaces are used more or less, and establish relationships between one another depending on a question of degree and relationship: the inherent uncertainty of each room and relationship to other degrees of uncertainty of other rooms. Between rooms, the type of each transition, the doors.

Personally, I would like to cover two categories of particular interest to me (which is no longer architecture, or not entirely anyway): that of degree and relationship. The house is coordinated (determined) from a non-essentialist perspective: it is not types of rooms that are drawn up (only in a secondary manner) but rather relative intensities of use (degree of uncertainty relative to the other degrees of uncertainty). You are not heard citing the kitchen, the living room, the bedroom, the bathroom, although those rooms exist as such. Does that mean you are not taking them into account? Obviously not, and besides that would be to ridicule what’s in play here. But from a theoretical standpoint, that brings another question to the fore: that the kitchen be such is contingent as it depends on the intensities of use (I’m not particularly referring to the Casa OS kitchen).

Let me explain: a house’s essential (in the most literal, strongest sense of the word) attribute is not its having a kitchen. In fact we can imagine lifestyles in which the kitchen disappears from the household (this is happening). In that case, the kitchen would end up having a different degree of uncertainty and another level of specification *and the entire system of relationships would be reconsidered*. That could not happen if one were to believe that it is impossible to design a house without a kitchen; they would believe that the kitchen is an essential attribute of anything that is a house. The kitchen would still occupy a place without being “used” (this is also happening). If we put the focus on the question of use—and that can only be measured in intensities or degrees—we can imagine a house without a kitchen because first and foremost the kitchen space is “a degree of uncertainty relative to a system of relationships” and not an essential characteristic of all houses (an exclusively typological treatment of the house).

Herein lies where I see the open part, in the balance between specification and indeterminacy. Or better yet, to avoid reduction: it is about organizing (determining) that game of specification/nonspecification, all of those relationships. As Oteiza said: coincidence, chance or risk are organized, calcu-



lated; they are never shapeless. I think this is how that awkward dialogue can be clarified: Casa OS could be understood from that calculation, that form of calculating. At the very least it could be understood as the aspiration to tread upon that region where the architect withdraws (without withdrawing).

Sociological questions aside: “aren’t all disciplines peripheral”? Yes. It’s always been that way. What happened is nothing more than the illusion of a nonexistent centrality of the Architect, and that myth of Centrality has passed through not only architecture but an entire era that is ending now. Is it enough? At the very least, it’s realistic without being cynical. What’s worrying is that this “give and take” ends up as simply everything being “enough,” and there the richness of that first humble withdrawal will inevitably be mistaken for a kind of poverty.

#### ARQUITECTURA-G

Our intention was to end this conversation with a series of conclusions. However, realizing that the topic lends itself to an open conversation without conclusions defined as such, and that we agree about the essentials, we have decided to skip that part.

We would like to steer the conversation toward the magazine topic to wrap things up. The indeterminate part of what we’ve been discussing, the appropriation of space by the inhabitant: is this related to interior design? What is interior design to you?

#### EKHI

I think that throughout these emails we’ve outlined what can initially be considered this “interior design” concept, or what’s usually called the “interior,” which is ultimately this question about what is inherent to the discipline. At the very least, we have outlined what idea of space is problematic or contemplated here. From the periphery of my discipline, which is even further from interior design than architecture, I will try to speak to this issue.

Perhaps it is superfluous to point out that interior design can never be a “specialty of taste,” because starting with the first text the debate itself has been approached in contrast with that idea. If it is not a “specialty of taste” (for as subtle as that may be), what is? Although architecture determines a “surface,” that “surface” must in turn be determined by the inhabitant. And at that point “interior design” should provide assistance by developing the right instruments. But then, should it go for just gadgets or furniture? Obviously not solely. But that’s where it becomes problematic, this task of understanding “interior design” and the relationships established with architecture. Perhaps it’s that this idea of “interior design”—whether that be as a discipline or the mere act of utilizing a space or working on it for it to be inhabited—is an attempt to organize the architectural surface that has been offered, without determining once and for all every one of its possibilities for “use.”

If Casa OS is organized in relation to “degrees of uncertainty” relative to the “use” of the rooms, and the intensity and variety of that “use,” will it not be the activity of working with the “interior,” the rooms, the ratio of those uses, of those certainties and uncertainties?

#### NOLASTER

Construction and architecture may in fact have the same relationship that decoration and interior design have. Architecture should offer the users a space that exceeds their expectations. It must handle with precision the available resources, as well as the needs and the social and physical environment being developed—that much is clear. But the product created is a result of other factors that do not impose conditions, but are in essence intentions being materialized.

When intentions are brought to fruition in a satisfactory and coherent manner, a piece of architecture appears, or a redistribution is done and textures are arranged in an interior in such a way that might prove exciting to us. This provides

us with situations in which a contemporary inhabitant can get situated and develop, all the while doing so inside a setting that is their own. Therefore, interior design seems something not created by the user. They can dress it up, decorate it or put different touches on it, but we'd like to think that requires more intentions than the immediate comfort that the inhabitant can self-provide. It is not an issue of one's discipline or trade, but rather projection and engagement. Actually, there doesn't seem to be all that much distance between what one must think about in order to do a 12-story building for a Korean systems-integration company on the outskirts of Bologna, and the adaptation of a 400-meter space so as to turn it into a restaurant that will offer meals costing 77 euros, or even designing a street bench that will be mass produced for installation throughout half of Europe.

### ARQUITECTURA-G

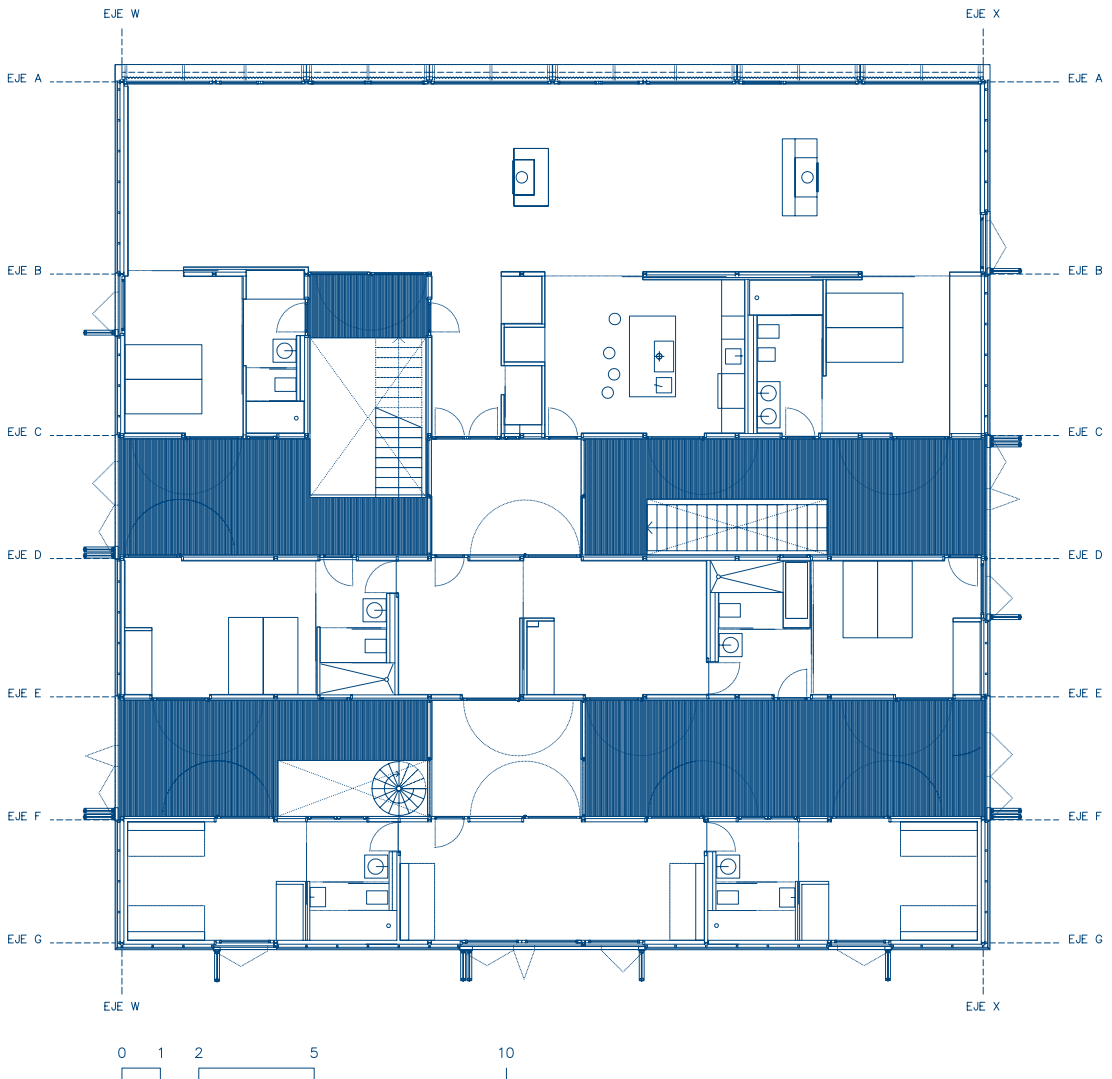
"Thus, it is untrue that when I paint a street or a wall that they become unreal. They are still real despite being painted differently for my scene. I'm required to modify or remove the colors that I run across, in order to produce an acceptable composition. Let's say we have a blue sky: Who knows if it's going to work? And if I can't use it, what am I to do with it? Then I take a grey day as a neutral backdrop where I can put in all the color elements that work for me: a tree, a house, a ship, an automobile, a telephone pole. It's like having a blank sheet for laying out the colors."

—Michelangelo Antonioni

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## BEDFORD PRESS

Bedford Press is a small-scale, fully functioning printing press operating out of a closet at the Architectural Association. The aim of this recent initiative is to integrate the production of printed materials into the AA Print Studio's existing focus on generating content, editing and design. By establishing a direct link between content/design and technology/production Bedford Press proposes a more responsive model of small-scale architectural publishing, nimble enough to

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Image: Detail of workflow diagram extracted from frontispiece in *Cedric Price Works II*, published by AA Publications, 1984

## BOUNDARIES AND ETHICS OF DWELLING

by arquitectura-g  
conversation with FAR and Ekhi Lopetegi

All photographs courtesy Cristobal Palma



Apartamento Magazine speaks about the appropriation of the space by the inhabitant, about the reflection of his/her personality at home. In short, about dwelling and its consequences. In this issue we deal with the fact of dwelling from the whole architectural process; From the project at its drawing board stages, until it is inhabited, passing through it's construction.

The *Wall House* by FAR Frohn & Rojas is really suitable to discuss this topic. It is a magnificent suburban residence in Santiago de Chile. As they say in their website, "opposed to the general notion that our living environments can be properly described and designed "on plan", this project is a design investigation into how the qualitative aspects of the wall, as a complex membrane,

structure our social interactions and climatic relationships to enable specific ecologies to develop. The project breaks down the "traditional" walls of a house into a series of four delaminated layers in between which the different spaces of the house slip.

FAR (Marc Frohn & Mario Rojas Toledo) are a Cologne, Los Angeles and Santiago de Chile based networked architectural practice. This time is Marc Frohn who joins our via mail discussion along with Ekhi Lopetegi, philosopher and musician.

We present the topic of debate with an extract from a Martin Heidegger text, "Building, Dwelling, Thninking".

Building Dwelling Thinking

(...)

1. What is it to dwell?

(...)

The latter, building, has the former, dwelling, as its goal. Still, not every building is a dwelling. Bridges and hangars, stadiums and power stations are buildings but not dwellings; railway stations and highways, dams and market halls are built, but they are not dwelling places. Even so, these buildings are in the domain of our dwelling. That domain extends over these buildings and yet is not limited to the dwelling place. (...) Thus dwelling would in any case be the end that presides over all building. Dwelling and building are related as end and means. (...) Yet at the same time by the means-end schema we block our view of the essential relations. For building is not merely a means and a way toward dwelling -to build is in itself already to dwell. Who tells us this? Who gives us a standard at all by which we can take the measure of the nature of dwelling and building?

It is language that tells us about the nature of a thing, provided that we respect language's own nature.

(...)

What, then, does Bauen, building, mean? The Old English and High German word for building, buan, means to dwell. This signifies: to remain, to stay in a place. The real meaning of the verb bauen, namely, to dwell, has been lost to us. (...) Now to be sure the old word buan not only tells us that bauen, to build, is really to dwell; it also gives us a clue as to how we have to think about the dwelling it signifies. (...) That is, bauen, buan, bhu, beo are our word bin in the versions: ich bin, I am, du bist, you are, the imperative form bis, be. What then does ich bin mean? The old word bauen, to which the bin belongs, answers: ich bin, du bist mean: I dwell, you dwell. The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans are on the earth, is Buan, dwelling. To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. it means to dwell. The old word bauen, which says that man is insofar as he dwells, this word barren however also means at the same time to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine. (...) Building in the sense of preserving and nurturing is not making anything. Shipbuilding and temple-building, on the other hand, do in a certain way make their own works. Here building, in contrast with cultivating, is a constructing. Both modes of building-building as cultivating, Latin colere, cultura, and building as the raising up of edifices, aedificare -are comprised within genuine building, that is, dwelling. Building as dwelling, that is, as being on the earth, however, remains for man's everyday experience that which is from the outset "habitual"-we inhabit it, as our language says so beautifully: it is the Gewohnthe. For this reason it recedes behind the manifold ways in which dwelling is accomplished, the activities of cultivation and construction.

(...)

But if we listen to what language says in the word bauen we hear three things: 1. Building is really dwelling. 2. Dwelling is the manner in which mortals are on the earth. 3. Building as dwelling unfolds into the building that cultivates growing things and the building that erects buildings.

(...)

But "on the earth" already means "under the sky." Both of these also mean "remaining before the divinities" and include a "belonging to men's being with one another." By a primal oneness the four-earth and sky, divinities and mortals-belong together in one.

(...)

The mortals are the human beings. They are called mortals because they can die. To die means to be capable of death as death. Only man dies, and indeed continually, as long as remains on earth, under the sky, before the divinities. When we speak of mortals, we are already thinking of the other three along with them, but we give no thought to the simple oneness of the four.

This simple oneness of the four we call the fourfold. Mortals are in the fourfold by dwelling. But the basic character of dwelling is to spare, to preserve. Mortals dwell in the way they preserve the fourfold in its essential being, its presencing. Accordingly, the preserving that dwells is fourfold.

(...)

Mortals dwell in that they receive the sky as sky. They leave to the sun and the moon their journey, to the stars their courses, to the seasons their blessing and their inclemency; they do not turn night into day nor day into a harassed unrest.

Mortals dwell in that they await the divinities as divinities. In hope they hold up to the divinities what is unhelped for. They wait for intimations of their coming and do not mistake the signs of their absence. They do not make their gods for themselves and do not worship idols. In the very depth of misfortune they wait for the weal that has been withdrawn.

Mortals dwell in that they initiate their own nature-their being capable of death as death-into the use and practice of this capacity, so that there may be a good death. To initiate mortals into the nature of death in no way means to make death, as empty Nothing, the goal. Nor does it mean to darken dwelling by blindly staring toward the end.

In saving the earth, in receiving the sky, in awaiting the divinities, in initiating mortals, dwelling occurs as the fourfold preservation of the fourfold. To spare and preserve means: to take under

our care, to look after the fourfold in its presencing. What we take under our care must be kept safe. But if dwelling preserves the fourfold, where does it keep the fourfold's nature? How do mortals make their dwelling such a preserving? Mortals would never be capable of it if dwelling were merely a staying on earth under the sky, before the divinities, among mortals. Rather, dwelling itself is always a staying with things. Dwelling, as preserving, keeps the fourfold in that with which mortals stay: in things.

(...)

How is this done? In this way, that mortals nurse and nurture the things that grow, and specially construct things that do not grow. Cultivating and construction are building in the narrower sense. Dwelling, insofar as it keeps or secures the fourfold in things, is, as this keeping, a building. With this, we are on our way to the second question.

2. In what way does building belong to dwelling?

(...) We limit ourselves to building in the sense of constructing things and inquire: what is a built thing? A bridge may serve as an example for our reflections.

(...)

It does not just connect banks that are already there. The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream. The bridge designedly causes them to lie across from each other. One side is set off against the other by the bridge. Nor do the banks stretch along the stream as indifferent border strips of the dry land. With the banks, the bridge brings to the stream the one and the other expanse of the landscape lying behind them. It brings stream and bank and land into each other's neighborhood. The bridge gathers the earth as landscape around the stream.

(...)

To be sure, people think of the bridge as primarily and really merely a bridge; after that, and occasionally, it might possibly express much else besides; and as such an expression it would then become a symbol, for instance, it symbol of those things we mentioned before. But the bridge, if it is a true bridge, is never first of all a mere bridge and then afterward a symbol. And just as little is the bridge in the first place exclusively a symbol, in the sense that it expresses something that strictly speaking does not belong to it. (...) The bridge is a thing and only that. Only? As this thing it gathers the fourfold.

(...)

To be sure, the bridge is a thing of its own kind; for it gathers the fourfold in such a way that it allows a site for it. But only something that is itself a location can make space for a site. The location is not already there before the bridge is. Before the bridge stands, there are of course many spots along the stream that can be occupied by something. One of them proves to be a location, and does so because of the bridge.

(...)

Accordingly, spaces receive their being from locations and not from "space."

(...)

When we speak of man and space, it sounds as though man stood on one side, space on the other. Yet space is not something that faces man. It is neither an external object nor an inner experience. It is not that there are men, and over and above them space; for when I say "a man," and in saying this word think of a being who exists in a human manner-that is, who dwells-then by the name "man" I already name the stay within the fourfold among things. Even when we relate ourselves to those things that are not in our immediate reach, we are staying with the things themselves.

(...)

Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build. Our reference to the Black Forest farm in no way means that we should or could go back to building such houses; rather, it illustrates by a dwelling that has been how it was able to build.

(...)

Dwelling, however, is the basic character of Being in keeping with which mortals exist.

(...)

Building and thinking are, each in its own way, inescapable for dwelling. The two, however, are also insufficient for dwelling so long as each busies itself with its own affairs in separation instead of listening to one another.

(...)

The real plight of dwelling does not lie merely in a lack of houses. The real plight of dwelling is indeed older than the world wars with their destruction, older also than the increase of the earth's population and the condition of the industrial workers. The real dwelling plight lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the nature of dwelling, that they must ever learn to dwell. What if man's homelessness consisted in this, that man still does not even think of the real plight of dwelling as the plight? Yet as soon as man gives thought to his homelessness, it is a misery no longer. Rightly considered and kept well in mind, it is the sole summons that calls mortals into their dwelling.

### ARQUITECTURA-G

We have considered *wall house* to be very appropriate to talk about the ethics of dwelling, because as far as we are concerned this house speaks clearly of it and it is open to be analyzed over and above its formal or merely tendentious aspects.

So, the way we see this house is as an example of unity in architecture practice, resolving structure, shape and habitable areas in its construction. That is, we are not talking about a house made by the addition of independent units which are assembled together to give shape to the dwelling, but a habitable framework, and it shows it with no shame at all. There's no limit in-between but every piece can be understood at once. The architectural elements are corrupted turning the structure into a divider filter or shelves, and at the same time every component is bare with its raw materials talking about this ethics.

If people have to learn how to dwell (speaking in a Heideggeresque sense), constructing is in itself dwelling, therefore the way we build is the way we dwell, is the way we are men.

Can a house have a didactic function? Can a house help mankind to be men? Can it link us to the *earth*?

### MARC FROHN

I have a rather hard time imagining architecture as a didactic device. If - for example - the Wall House was such, it would - according to Merriam Webster - be "intended and designed to teach". Thus the prime objective of the house would be to convey ONE agenda of inhabitation that could more or less unmistakably be read by the occupant.

Instead I personally find your short description of the Wall House as a "habitable framework" very productive to touch upon some of the key aspects of the project beyond the obvious formal aspects. By definition a framework leaves room to be filled out and I think that exactly this is one of the challenging aspects of the project as to me it marks - both in the process of designing and building as well as in its occupation - an exploration into the environments of living: It allows to renegotiate boundaries both amongst the occupants and in relationship to the surrounding. It is in this sense *unconventional* in the truest sense of the word: By *unconventional* I don't mean "having a surprising form", but instead excluding some of our dearest assumptions of suburban living (that's what the house is) of privacy, personal space and relationship to the environment.

### EKHI LOPETEGI

My approach to the problem may seem theoretical but I don't intend to displace the conversation to non-architectural grounds. The way I see it, the core problem here is the relationship between the 'habitable framework' and the 'surrounding' or 'environment'. The concept of 'relationship' itself (between framework and

environment) seems to be the main issue in a way I shall explain. Let me explain this.

When Heidegger reminds us that we have to learn how to dwell, he's never inviting us to search for a certain content we should assimilate the same way we comprehend a mathematical theorem. On the contrary, he's inviting us to deal with things *in a proper way*. Basically, dealing with things is *being related to things in such and such a way*; so we can either relate to things properly or improperly. Being related to things in a proper way already means dealing with things according with the essence of dwelling. What kind of dealing with things is that of dwelling?

Far from the activity of occupying a certain space dwelling unfolds as cultivating and erecting buildings. Cultivating is *taking care* of things the way they essentially are, *letting them be* what they truly are; that is to say, we don't ask or pretend things to be the way we want them to be, rather we only take care of their growing keeping it safe from any danger so that the growing can take place according with its true essence.

On the other hand, building is arranging spaces in the way of producing locations for men and women, and all this according with the essence of dwelling. Those locations make the proper relationship to The Fourfold *take place*: we take earth *as earth*; we take sky *as sky*; we take death *as death*; we take divinities *as divinities*. That is, we take them the way they *already* are, we take them in a way we *let* them be what they are.

Heidegger's exotic argot should not hide the main problem concerning dwelling. For the problem is *ecopolitical*. From Heidegger's perspective, we could state that a culture anxiously searching for a way to avoid maturity through multiple make up strategies is not taking death *as death*. Building up a 'beach' where no beach has ever been naturally produced could easily be taken *as forcing earth to be a certain way* rather than taking earth *as it actually is*. And still, dwelling is not be taken as being according with 'nature' in a superficial way. MF wrote that the Wall-house "*allows to renegotiate boundaries both amongst the occupants and in relationship to the surrounding*". We could therefore ask whether there's a conscious ethico-political approach to architecture in the Wall-house; and if yes, what's the role of the 'bioclimatical' or the 'ecopolitical' in the architectural practices today.

### ARQUITECTURA-G

Talking about "*renegotiation of boundaries*" you both mentioned we might say that any house, as dwelling unit, has at least two general levels of limit:

- 1 The boundary among inner house and the outside
- 2 The inner boundaries between spaces

In the wall house, and in any suburban/garden house the outer limit gives more chance to think about than in an urban house. We consider that your choice, when





approaching the matter, it's been to blur the edge. The same reading is valid for the (almost non-existent) limits between interior spaces.

When crossing the house from its rigid core up to the surrounding area, we observe that as the spaces have a minor requirement of intimacy the house becomes more permeable up to getting blurred to open to the garden. In order to do it, aside from the materials hardness gradient, the geometry of the layers becomes more complex in a scheme that we could qualify as radial; (((concrete cave) stacked shelving) milky shell) soft skin). The resulting interstices are themselves a classic in-and-out space of modern architecture. However, the interstices speak to us of an ethics in the place positioning, as much from the functional point of view as from the formal one, and from the ecopolitical approach that Ekhi mentioned.

We notice that the aim or will of the wall house is not to indoctrinate –in the sense of dictate– how to live, but it is unavoidably a device that moderately determinates how to dwell as it configures a *scenario*. It is the soft thing, the smoothness of the boundaries which speaks to us of a new ethics of how to dwell, in which the negotiation between individuals or inhabitants supposes a greater shock of the one that exists in traditional houses made by cell addition.

#### MARC FROHN

Absolutely (Ekhi), there is an ethico political approach in architecture of the Wall House as it integrates the environment to become an inseparable part of its inhabitation. Obviously certain aspects of that approach are neither new nor unique to that project.

An important shift in the understanding of buildings in relationship to the environment has taken place over the last 20 or so years: Up until then architectural technology was used to achieve a complete separation of inside and outside. The air conditioning unit (actually called “weather maker” by its inventor Carrier) brought with it an isolationist and homogenizing attitude within architecture that lost any regional specificity and orientation as climate became a technically generated commodity. Since the early 80s this machine-like understanding of architecture has bit by bit been replaced by an understanding of architecture as an organism that mediates between the interior condition and the outside environment. Through that a certain understanding of “climate concept” developed for buildings. But what is important to me in the context of the Wall House is that this project relates to the environment in a way that goes beyond what is generally considered a “climate concept”. It formulates a multitude of possible connections that can be drawn between climate, environment, technology/material and inhabitation: Climate or Energy becomes a resource in the architectural vocabulary, a building material of sorts as spatial differentiation is achieved through the careful play with it. What that implies as a

result is that the architect gives up his or her position of full control in the process of establishing architectural space as the elements that define it on a daily basis are out of his or her reach: In the Wall House one inhabits climate zones more than spaces in the traditional sense. What the different material layers of the house do then is what I described before as a process of negotiation: the amount of light, heat, the depth of the view inside or out as well as the use of these spaces by the clients, all of those are within the range of this negotiation.

I find it important, that the eco political dimension of architecture does not just lead to an “accelerating arms race” in the material and technological battle for rising energy efficiency. As important as this is, it is too one dimensional. Sometimes it seems as if little thought is put into the question of how a new awareness of climate shapes our ways of relating to or inhabiting environment. To me the Wall House seeks to exactly do that: find possible relationships that go beyond a technological “solution” to the “problem” with our climate.

#### ARQUITECTURA-G

We do believe that the abuse of air conditioning which Marc was speaking about is already overcome. It exemplifies the context of a badly understood bioclimatic policy or energy efficiency. It is clear that we are at a point where it is possible to obtain a totally efficient architecture without being subordinated to ultracomplex technological systems, popular psychosis or business of the climate change. We can face a project attending to all inputs obtaining an efficient final score, that's why it seems more interesting to emphasize the limits. Some time ago Ekhi told us he considered that nowadays architecture is the architecture of limits.

This is exactly what we are interested in when we focus on the Wall House project. On the one hand, one of the principles of the house is considering the hedges that surround the plot as the first layer (limit) of the project. In this case, in spite of the covers of the house are getting blurred and becoming lighter radially from interior to exterior, the diamond-like formal aspect of the housing is so powerful and fits so well to what it is (to its construction), we understand that ultimately it turns out to be an object that is closed on itself, without taking in consideration the immediate surrounding. On the other hand, once first membrane is crossed we enter the game of the habitable framework we were speaking about.

At the Perception Restrained MOMA exhibition by Herzog and DeMeuron, Herzog said that the imaginary of what a house is has an incorruptible strength for them, where a room is a room, a kitchen a kitchen, and a sitting room a sitting room. Just like that, what could be different between the nowadays images and the ones from a Hammershoi picture would be limits. The bridge wick Heidegger talks about is not a static element as far as we are concern, but an element of connection. It actually works as an opening, as a flow. The Wall House works just the same way in its interior.

The other day a friend asked for our opinion about how to reform his flat in the city centre, in Barcelona. We opened up his mind about what a partition means, and that it doesn't have to be a boundary by itself. It is not about emptying or using transparent materials, but it is about configuring autonomous not clearly-defined spaces yet still a sitting room, a bedroom or a kitchen, as Herzog referred to them.

That's why we are interested in knowing what were you Ekhi saying in that conversation where you talked about today's architecture as the architecture of boundaries and how you see the Wall House in that context. Also we would like to know your opinion, Marc.

#### EKHI LOPETEGI

So far, two discussion topics can be distinguished from our mailing: one concerning architectural or aesthetical problems inner to the discipline itself (the in/out problem); another one linked to the problem we called ecopolitical that frames the architecture in a wider context. Obviously, both cross over and we can only make such a distinction as far as it is useful to our discussion purposes.

Let's face the first topic. It can be stated that the in/out problem has crossed architectural practices all the way from modernism to contemporary architecture. Although limiting is never to be taken as its only feature, architecture is necessarily based on establishing certain limits out of which 'places' emerge. Taken this way architecture could be understood as the art of shaping



places through coordinating certain limits and working on their co-relationships. Nevertheless the practice of co-relating limits seems to be over-determined by a binary relationship between the inside and the outside, dwelling unit and environment, in and out. Although this is not always to be taken as 'a problem to be solved', it seems like architecture has always been concerned with the purpose of overcoming this dialectical opposition. So, it can be said that the Wall house seems to follow the path modernists walked. Some remarks can be done on this, though. The way modernists dealt with the in/out problem can be exemplified with early works such as the Bauhaus building in Dessau (of course, I'm aware of the simplification here): the reconciliation between the inside and the outside is mainly achieved with the curtain wall. A *visual* relationship between the inside and the outside is established. However, a transparent wall is still a wall *containing certain isolated indoor environmental conditions*. I therefore agree with MF when he suggests that there's an isolationist attitude in the machine-image based architecture. No categories as *permeability* or *softness* can be applied to the traditional curtain walled architecture. Climate or Energy based architecture's starting point is completely different. It's not about *transparency* but *energetical permeability* between layers. The radial geometry of the Wall house is based on degree differences between a 'hard' core and a 'soft' surface. Obviously these categories are relative for 'soft' always stands for 'softer than' the way 'hard' does, and this conceptual remark is not a simple trick. Actually, it's an essential feature of the *rather energetical than visual reconciliation of the inside and the outside* searched or negotiated in the Wall house.

One last remark concerning the second topic. I find absolutely necessary being aware "that the ecopolitical dimension of architecture does not just lead to an 'accelerating arms race' in the material and technological battle for rising energy efficiency" as MF writes. For if we meditate enough on the main issue concerning the ecopolitical approach to architecture we'll notice that it's not about solving bioclimatic problems within a *bioclimatically blind framework*, but about founding the architectural practice itself on a *bioclimatically aware framework*. That is, changing the whole paradigm depending on which our approach to architecture is defined. Indeed, this is what Heidegger's text is about: the proper way of dwelling is that in which our approach to things is proper too. As I already wrote, that would mean dealing with things according with their essence.

#### MARC FROHN

I think that it is quite productive to bring the discussion back to the issue of boundary as it will actually help us to tie the two strains of the discussion that E characterized together once more: I want to step back for a moment to see how we characterize boundary as I think it will help us relating the two trajectories. To some degree it builds on an issue that A-G brought up,

when referring to the “flow” and “opening” of the Wall House. I think that in the context of both describing this house, but also in seeing architecture in general in relationship to a larger eco-political context it becomes crucial to overcome the notion of boundary as object, as fixed element of separation. Instead I would follow Michelle Addington in her argument that “perceptual environments – those that determine what we feel, hear and see – are all thermodynamic in that they are fundamentally about the motion of energy”. Thus their boundaries, too, should be thought of in that vein, as they don’t interest me as static elements of separation, but more as behaviours and interaction. Thus the boundary becomes a zone of exchange between two environments. From here I think it is a small step only to get to A-G’s point of the “element of connection”. At the same time it constitutes for me one of the aspects of a “bioclimatically aware framework” (EL).

#### EKHI LOPETEGI

When we first started the discussion I wasn't really aware of how the boundary concept has changed once the bioclimatical issues interfere the formal and geometrical problems. When we talk about the bioclimatical we already talk about the energetical and therefore about the thermodynamical. The sentence quoted by Marc explains it clearly. The environment is not only a geometrical complex of formal volumes; it deals now with *formally ambiguous substances* such as heat, noise, light and on. Is not that we found new substances to care about determining architectural results; it's more than even old and classical variables such as light or

heat will be treated in a different way once we adopt a 'bioclimatically aware' perspective. This perspective is one in which architectural substances or matters *affect* each other; they're not *contained* in formal geometries but rather they already *correlate* in a diffuse way. Thus, from an energetical framework the 'boundary' is just the *zone* in which the substances meet, interact and affect each other ("zone of exchange"); the 'boundary' between a built unit and its environment will thus be a co-affective one too. The difference between the inside and the outside will therefore be a *degree* difference. The new space is built upon a general principle of *affection* derived from the energetical or thermodynamical viewpoint.

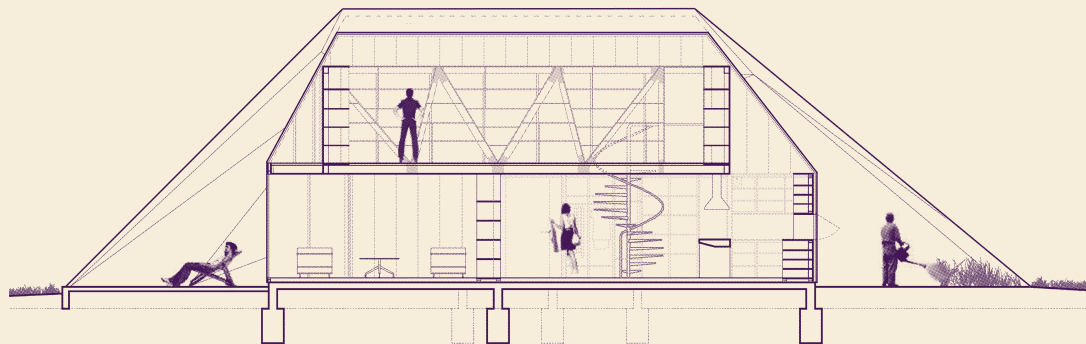
#### ARQUITECTURA-G

We like the idea of house's fragility, the sensuality of the boundaries that goes beyond the material. A house that on the one hand exposes itself unsteadily, but on the other hand combines welcoming, warm and human inner spaces. As we said before, the house works radially, and it is true that it radiates in a temperature slope. This approach to understanding the boundary is nice and contemporary, owing to the fact that the temperature is (as in Joseph Beuys' work) in a certain way what makes you feel you are at home, and the temperature *is* as a result of the geometry, construction and architecture. This way to understanding the limit, is the way the house *is*.

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# THE ADVANTAGES OF LIVING ON A LOOP by ARQUITECTURA-G

Conversation with Powerhouse Company  
and Ekhi Lopetegi

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Our studio has recently been commissioned to transform a 16<sup>th</sup>-century traditional Basque house into two dwellings. When you face a project of this kind, more factors than usual come into play. You rarely deal with a tabula rasa, and sometimes the context is the background; however, in cases like this, its presence is so powerful it becomes the co-star.

When approaching an existent being which has worked in a certain way, you have the mission of making it yours without making it disappear. You get into the game of appropriation of the space by removing, adding or plainly transforming. This game requires sometimes subtle acts, but occasionally the action can be drastic.

This is what Apartamento is about; no matter if it's a flat, a penthouse or a garage. You paint a wall or you demolish it, transforming a space with a previous identity into something new, completely yours.

The Spiral House project by Powerhouse Company fits really well in this subject. It sets out a complex matter in a simple and clear way: a typical burgundy farmhouse, for example, set on a large terrain needs extension that will just about double the house.

We invited them to have a conversation alongside Ekhi Lopetegi, philosopher and musician, and Charles Bessard (office partner, along with Nanne de Ru) who joins us in this discussion.

This time we have decided to tackle our discussion with the film 'Groundhog Day'. We see a relation between the movie and the space Spiral House creates. We could state that Bill Murray drives a loop, which takes place in the town and modifies the space by manipulating elements in a repeating time...



## ARQUITECTURA-G

We agreed in the previous conversations that architecture is something that mostly belongs to “time”. Not only in its generative process but in the time for being understood, modified, assimilated, lived and demolished. In that way, Bill Murray prompts situations that change the space in a way that suits his tastes once he understands his new world, and, as a last resort, changes himself by self-improving.

Being the Spiral House a suggestive act, neither a parasitic nor futile extension, it provokes a new understanding of the existing fabric; we don't have only a house or a spiral, nor strictly the addition of the two, but something new, different.

We would like you to explain the physical and functional connection between the two bodies, as your website drafts don't show it at all. Furthermore, we would like to know if, in your opinion, an extension can provoke in an immediate and aggressive form, a new way of understanding the space, or if it's something gradual, with two bodies converging over the time.

## POWERHOUSE COMPANY

The Spiral House is a house extension that creates a link between the ground floor and the loft floor of an existing farmhouse. The existing building was organised according to a traditional 19<sup>th</sup>-century lifestyle with a strong spatial segregation between the two levels: the dining and hosting parts on the ground floor and the more intimate family area including the bedrooms and a study on the upper level, with a tight separation between the two. This reflects the rising bourgeoisie lifestyle of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century where the representational rooms like the living room and the dining room were completely separated from the daily rooms like the bedrooms and the kitchen. This polarisation of the domestic functions resulted in the familial life never meeting the social and representational life of the family.

By restricting the guest area to only a small part of the house it gave the guests the vague impression remaining in the antechamber of the house without really entering the family's life. For this young family of winemakers who decided to live in a small typical burgundy village, inviting guests implied in most of cases an overnight stay and required more area.

The Spiral House extends the program of the existing house with a large living room joined with a study and a cigar/home-cinema corner, two guest rooms, a children guest room / play zone and an additional kid room. While the existing house dedicated 80% of the area to the daily familial life and only 20% to the social life, the extension was to be the opposite with 80% for the guests and 20% for the family.

From an architectural point of view, it meant that we had to understand the extension as complementary yet opposite element to the existing house. While the architecture of the original house was “closed” and exhibited discrete banality, the architecture of the extension had to be more open and extra-verted.

But opposition doesn't necessarily mean segregation, and we designed the extension as a continuous space spiraling from the ground floor to the roof level. It departs from the existing dining room and has been extended with the new living room / study/ cigar corner, and it ends in the roof connecting the new kid's room and play room with the old common children room. In the ascending part one finds two guest rooms connecting visually with the ground floor with the upper level, and becoming the link between the social and the intimate sides of the house. The existing house is incorporated as a part of a continuous circulation from old to new, from ground to roof and from intimacy to openness. The Spiral House embraces a part of the garden to form a patio between the extension and the

existing house creating a visual link between all the rooms and the two levels while maintaining a nuanced level of intimacy.

The extension and then existing house have an ambivalent relationship. They have more or less the same area and therefore cohabit without any clear hierarchy. Sometimes the extension steps back and leave the foreground to the existing house and sometimes it decisively takes over the old structure depending from where it is observed. Together they form a “Siamese” body made of two opposite yet complementary parts. They form a diptych. They are two chapters of a story about the sudden change of destination of use the old farmhouse and its land into an urbanite's mansion. The brutal appearance of the extension precipitates the whole on a new and unexpected course, like the storm in the plot of the Groundhog's Day. In this case the extension is not conceived as a continuation of the existing one, but as an unexpected and external event changing the course of the “plot”. In that sense the two bodies are not converging in time, but are precipitated together in a new situation like Phil and Rita in the initial script; where instead of being back to normal, they were kept irreversibly captive of the time loop and are forced to explore together the possibilities of this new situation.

## EKHI LOPETEGUI

I wouldn't like to reduce the complexities of the Spiral House to its most obvious and eye catching feature, but the encounter between the extension and the farmhouse at the roof level deserves some remarks. As Charles (POWERHOUSE) wrote, the extension's appearance is ‘brutal’ and in my opinion the more brutal it appears the more interesting it gets. Instead of a Siamese body, I would say it's more like a prosthesis, for every prosthesis entails a formal and functional aggression and strongly makes reference to the difference between the bodies connected. The visual relationship between the two bodies as volumes is not transitional or continuous, even though there is a functional transition and continuity in pragmatic terms that makes the two bodies work efficiently. Above all, the strangeness of the new body is highlighted and so it is the violence the prosthesis does to the old ‘maison’.

Two subjects come to mind at this point. In terms of memory, by explicitly showing the present burst into the past, the Spiral House implies a discontinuous or non-linear historical approach. And this is achieved not by some fancy futuristic trick (that would probably entail a rather linear approach), but by the sober but radical presence of the new body. What we see is not the 19<sup>th</sup>-century lifestyle friendly meet the 21<sup>st</sup>-century forms of life. What we see is two historical situations collide.



So, the way I see it, the historical encounter is understood as a confrontation. The whole historical timeline is broken and the gap in between is uncovered violently.

Related to this temporal feature, in terms of space, the confrontation is even more dramatic. The whole idealistic idea of the ‘maison’ as a whole, complete and finished object is destroyed. The visual image of this farmhouse, this childish ‘triangle + cube’ image of a house, is perverted by a simple gesture of coupling two bodies in a visually arbitrary point. In my opinion there's an underlying principle concerning any architectural interventions that could be expressed as follows: any object or volume can be cut off in any of its points. Which doesn't mean the cut off is arbitrary, for the functional coherence and efficiency will always be a measure and a value. But it clearly shows the house is partially taken in consideration, not as a whole ideal unit.

Gordon Matta Clark showed us this in other terms by cutting off building size volumes as if they were hand size sculptures, and this way he broke the idea of how those objects should look in our mind's eye, opening a new field for volumetric experimentation. As far as the Spiral House is a dwelling unit and not a plain body, we should maybe quote Deleuze and Guattari's first principle for a definition of a rhizome, which encloses this pragmatic feature:

“1 and 2. Principles of connection and heterogeneity: any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be... semiotic chains of every nature are connected to very diverse modes of coding (biological, political, economic, etc.) that bring into play not only different regimes of signs but also states of things of differing status.”

Obviously, architecture can also be understood as a bunch of ‘modes of coding’ space, with their particular set of rules and syntax. The Spiral House connects two heterogeneous architectural regimes (the 19th century farm house and its extension); the connection is understood as fragmentary (both units connect in a partial and arbitrary point, the roof level), and not as the complete harmonisation of different dwelling units or codes; therefore, the Spiral House provokes the rupture of the farm house coherence in favour of a new functional and spacial relationship that opens the house to new dwelling possibilities.

## ARQUITECTURA-G

We find interesting to invert the proportion 80% public / 20% private, because it complements the house in a yin-yang-like way, with the background idea of making the house more open.



Thinking about the Spiral House as an opening to itself though, it looks even more interesting to us; to understand the farm like a closed and finished being that generates something open to new possibilities when breaking (like Ekhi pointed mentioning Matta-Clark). “Two bodies kept irreversibly captive of the time loop and forced to explore together the possibilities of this new situation”, but Matta-Clark showed us the entrails and then his action was over. His aim wasn't to create a place to live in, although it could be a space to live.

The farm is broken and it loses its closed unity, its iconic identity fades out, it's opened up. Then, in contraposition program is added and related with the existing one and what we get is the Spiral House. Is this opening something for closing it back? Could a house be an open box, or is the program too rigid (due to its finite possibilities) and therefore requires us to a closed outcome?

We prefer the definition of “two Siamese bodies” for the whole rather than the Ballardian prosthesis one for the new piece. Prostheses are artifices subordinated to a body that brings them life, and in this case the dialogue is from equal to equal. One could usually live without prosthesis, but in this case, and for this program, they are two bodies that die when separated.

It's evident but important to see that we have two bodies, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century one and the 21<sup>st</sup>-century one. It is this last one, the spiral, which achieves that, although they are two bodies that work continuously as a single one. The new body is a programmatic gradient that gives continuity to the two existing trays that had premeditated and polarized functions. Thus, the Spiral House considers a contemporary way of living more than giving a formal answer to what a XXI century house should be. It looks for a new way of dwelling.

## POWERHOUSE COMPANY

Brutality is often referred as a negative word, because it is most often associated with the idea of the “brute”, a being with a cruel or aggressive behavior. But brutality can also mean something “brut”, raw and un-mitigated like in the case of Jean Dubuffet's “art brut”. In that sense the brutality of the Spiral House is in our eyes directed at the site and not directed at the old house. The two volumes share the same an unmitigated relationship to the site. This is the only thing they have in common and that is also what unites them.

When looking at the site plan, the old house appears as if it was “dropped” randomly on the site - it makes no attempt to insert itself in the context.

When we visited the first time we immediately noticed it, the old house was sitting on the site in the same way as a forgotten and isolated object would, as something left behind. But somehow its isolation and its brutal juxtaposition on the site had a positive aspect: it almost gave to the old house the status of a sculpture displayed in a park. On the other hand the banality of the volume prevented the house to really achieve its potential sculptural presence and inhabit the site as such.

Though the extension was to double the size of the house it was clear that it would not be insufficient to occupy or inhabit the park. At the very beginning we tried to design it as a landscape architecture where the extension would become a “hill” attached to the old house attempting to anchor it on the site. But it never worked, the sculptural potential of the old house was getting weaker and the new landscape element was simply too small and too anecdotal compared to the overwhelming size of the site.

It became clear that we had to find a third approach.

To reinforce the sculptural aspect of the old house and to

reinforce the presence of both inhabitations in the site, we designed the extension as a new sculptural volume dropped next to the old one. In this way the contrast between the two strengthened their identity, as well as helped each other to claim their sculptural presence in the park.

We do not think the relationship between the buildings as brutal since there is no cruelty in it. We see it more as an abrupt but playful encounter where the two volumes engage vigorously with each other. Let's say it's like an intercourse without foreplay... not necessarily unpleasant if there is no victim.

Arquitectura-G mentioned that the Spiral House "considers a contemporary way of living more than a formal answer to what a XXI-st century house should be". We agree very much with this statement and that is the way we've approach the design of this house. In this regard, it is interesting to compare the two volumes because they testify the changes in the understanding of a house. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century houses are organized with a very clear separation between "leisure rooms" like the salon, and "utilitarian rooms" like the kitchen, bedrooms etc. In the case of a farm the exterior is also the result of utilitarian approach to materials and structure. At the opposite, the Spiral House is fully designed as a pleasurable experience that offers a diversity of an internal as well as external situation. The old house becomes a part of this diversity of spaces and is not perceived anymore as a conventional straightjacket.

By understanding the two houses as an array of spatial experiences, it opens unlimited possibilities to extend it beyond its pure functional program.

In that respect the Spiral House did open up the old house to a new understanding shifting from a utilitarian to a qualitative interpretation.

We had the opportunity recently, with a project in Russia, to experiment with a similar situation but with more radicalism. We had to design a 2500m<sup>2</sup> penthouse 300m above ground, and that was also for a single family with young kids. Designing for example a 500m<sup>2</sup> living room is very unusual, and certainly cannot be approached from a functional and programmatic point of view - imagine how many sofas one would need to furnish it. This radical situation allowed us to illustrate clearly what the focus of our architecture is about.

#### EKHI LOPETEGUI

I should maybe clarify what I meant by 'brutal'. I maybe put a special emphasis on its aggressiveness, but I don't really think of it in a negative way, no victims or unpleasant feelings are presupposed here. What I actually meant is what Arquitectura-G explained in a more concise way as the losing of the iconic identity of the house. This, too, can seem ambiguous though, for the iconic identity of the house is also highlighted with the intervention, as far as it shows the bodies as clearly limited individual units. So, the gesture of coupling the volumes somehow reinforces both the identity and the losing of it. The conceptual play of the difference and the identity is shown in its fullest here by bringing it up as an unsolved subject that architecture faces as such.

Of course, the coming together of the dwelling units has to be seen as a 'playful encounter' rather than as a 'problematic crash'. It is playful because we gain new dwelling possibilities, and not only in terms of program. As explained in the Russian project, the design of a 500m<sup>2</sup> living room cannot be achieved in utilitarian terms so the approach must include some other experiential criteria. It can be guessed that this shift is entailed in the Spiral House too, as far as it's "fully designed as a pleasurable experience", exceeding thus the utilitarian point of view. This is maybe how the 'qualitative interpretation' mentioned

can be understood. The inclusion of such a wide concept as experience reframes the whole architecture perspective and uncovers a series of new problems, both theoretical and practical. We could ask how 'experience' is understood in the Spiral House, even though I know the answer to such a concept can be hard to figure out. At least, we could state that the farm house as an utilitarian complex wasn't meant to be experienced but to be used, while the Spiral House seems to seek being a place for 'having experiences' of any type. We should never misunderstand this though, because being designed for having some sort of 'experience' won't ever erase the functional needs, but it will necessarily include 'experience' as a variable to be taken as part of the program itself.

Therefore (apart from the gap separating the building and the site) because it's linked to 'experience', it makes sense considering the farmhouse and the extension in its 'sculptural potential'. Sculpturally taken, the Spiral House falls under some sort of aesthetic treatment or point of view. I don't mean that the house is now treated more artistically; I simply mean that it's supposed to be a source of certain 'sensations' (the 'pleasurable experience'), and not only supposed to be a functional facility. In the end the word 'aesthetic' etymologically means nothing but 'perceiving' or 'having sensations'. Now I should ask Charles, is this conceptual link between experience and architecture also considered while facing a project?

#### POWERHOUSE COMPANY

About the conceptual link between experience and architecture:

I understand your question from two points of views.

Does it mean that we design spaces independently of the functionality of spaces?

No, in the sense that we take the functions of the house as a departure point and make sure that the spaces we design do not become unpractical.

But yes indeed, in the sense that we do not limit the experience of living in the house (because that's what it is all about) to pure questions of efficiency and spatial economy and therefore have to seek qualities such as: intimacy, openness, exposure, mirroring. For example the Spiral House is both intimate and both exposed; intimate because it is rolling around itself and exposed in the sense that it is possible to the house from the house at any point of the Spiral House.

The Spiral House is very abstract for a house, it doesn't look like a house, and it is a bit of an alien in the landscape of the village. It has no formal reference and its form results of its sequence of experiences, like going under the house to enter it, entering it from its heart, looking at the house from the house, the traveling on the landscape, the progressive decrease in ceiling height, etc. Those experiences were much more important for this project than the final form of the house. The abruptness and abstraction of the form prompts the visitor to experience it, otherwise it is difficult to understand it. It is sculptural but it is not Gehry-like and it is abstract but it is not a functionalist house. It is also not photogenic but it is very nice space to inhabit. The owners are planning to use it as the main house and use the old house as the extension; we can't really resist bragging about it.

The second way we understand your question regards the way we produce a project and eventually a building. Architecture in this respect is always very frustrating because we can't fully experience a project until it is finished and occupied. In this regard we are very envious of graphic designers or artists who work at a 1:1 scale. It is not really feasible with architecture so we try to compensate that with a lot of physi-

cal models at very different scale. This still remains for us the best way to design a house. Strangely enough, a cardboard model still looks and feels more "real" than any super-realistic rendering.

#### ARQUITECTURA-G

We don't avoid talking about the "sculptural object", but we plainly believe that it doesn't describe this house, and probably neither the architecture. At the same time, we don't think it's an abstract house. It's a construction that responds directly to a problem or will. It's a house that can be experienced and lived without requiring any intellectual effort or architectural knowledge, and that's a victory.

In this case we can't state if the shape is nice or not, photogenic or not, in fact it doesn't matter. It (the shape) tells us how the house is lived and how this addition lets someone experience the whole in a new way; we could say that the Spiral House is functionally transparent.

The addition responds to the request in a physical way, that's why the aggression over the original, pure and canonical object is rude, vigorous, and even sexual. This relation seems very attractive to us and provides the strength of the project.

Talking about the subject of anchoring to the place in such vast plot with a house "dropped" on, we don't think the Spiral House is a landscape architecture solution as an object in a scenic context and linked to it, we think it's a project that is understood from its core to outside.

The house is somehow something not related to the sur-

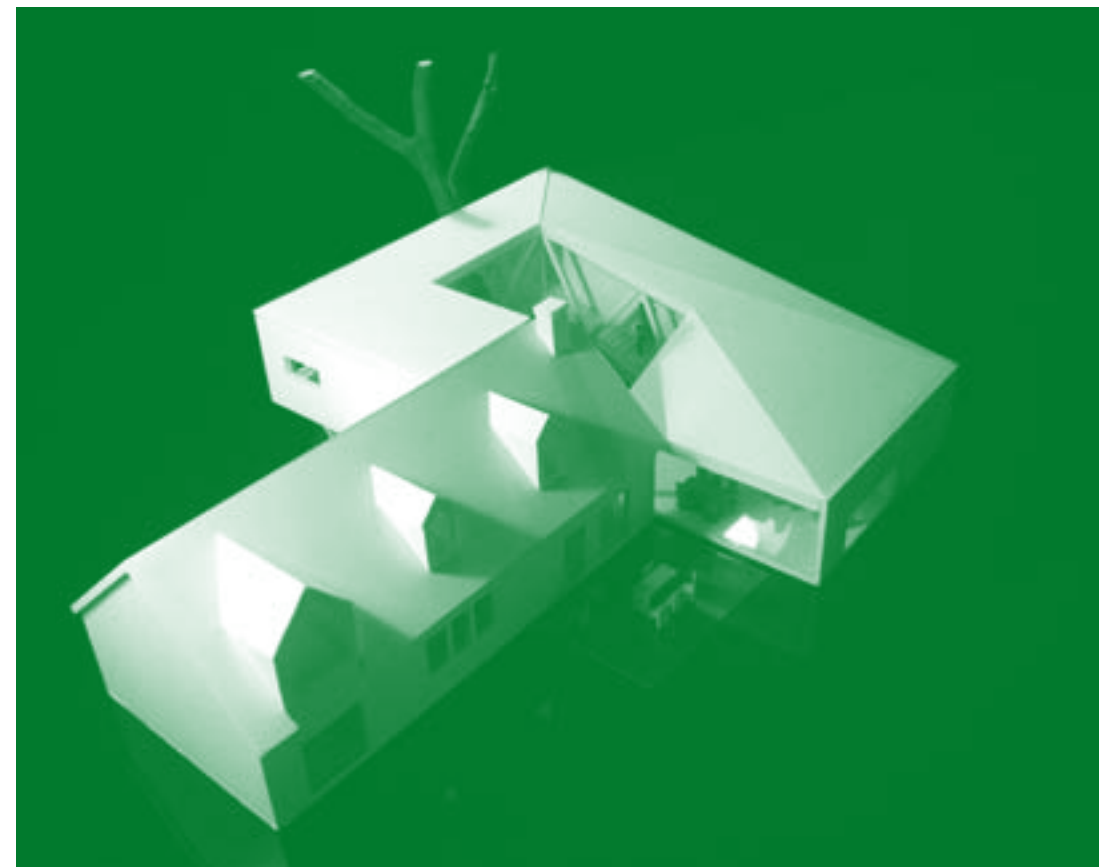
roundings, and the appropriation of the plot is seen from the inner living experience. For instance, the patio or the spiral sets out when touching the farm in the ground floor, where a small piece of plot defines a summer dining room.

Those generative gestures are which make these constructions not sculptural, are new realities of architectural experience.

The gradual ascent surrounding the patio lets us experience the original body like something new viewing it from a historically unusual point of view. In the same way we understand the program itself like something new; a smoking room is quite different from a bedroom, but it's not so far from a children playing room or a study. Like we said in previous conversations, approaching subjects as the flexibility in this way is very contemporary and sets out where are the nowadays inhabitant's limits.

Besides this, we are talking in terms of two houses; while we would like to see it as a whole, a single one, where some time ago there was one and the time and requirements brought us another different one. That's why we can't help having a little disappointment when you say that the owners are thinking of using the new part as first home. In the same way that the Russian penthouse of 500m<sup>2</sup> living room requires a different dwelling experience from having 50 sofas in it, the Spiral House should be inhabited like a new experience of the whole, without the barrier of time or material difference.

We would like to know your opinion on it (Ekhi and Charles) and also (Charles) if this distinction is a program input.



**EKHI LOPETEGUI**

So far it seems like the discussion has opened many fields concerning different features of the Spiral House. I'd like to make one last and brief remark on the issue of the connection between the two bodies and the experience of the Spiral House as a whole.

Arquitectura-G seems to be focused on the fact that the experience of the Spiral House is the experience of a complete and unified dwelling unit. We should make some distinctions here. It happens to be true that in terms of inhabiting the house, living everyday life, the extension shouldn't really have to be taken as a separate body. That is why the two bodies work together. As far as they do work together they generate a new field for the functional experience of the house. Sculpturally taken, though it doesn't really seem that the two bodies can form a unique one, they don't and can't come together as one.

We should therefore separate the inner and outer experiences of the house. One is pragmatic and the other is visual and voluminous. The border between both can be blurry sometimes, but it seems like the functional use of the inner space and the outer impression of the bodies connecting are somehow heterogeneous; it also seems like the outside/inside opposition shows up clearly in the Spiral House as an essential feature of it. There is an sculptural experience of the house based on the relationship between the bodies and the relationship between the bodies and the surrounding landscape, as well as there's a pragmatic one based on its inner functional use. Iconically taken, there is no communion between the bodies; functionally taken there's a "pretend" one based on programmatic efficiency and harmony.

I'll end with a couple of questions that don't really seek to underestimate the building, for the Spiral House gets more interesting with the more the questions it generates.

Could it be true that the utilitarian efficiency of the Spiral House is at stake with the fact that the owners plan to move to the extension of the old house? Is it possible that, despite the beauty and power of the Spiral House, the gap between the two buildings could be impossible to overcome?

**POWERHOUSE COMPANY**

It is not a programmatic input and they always conceived the Spiral House as only an extension until it was finished. When they mentioned switching houses they, in fact, only mentioned shifting their own bedroom.

Though I totally agree with Arquitectura-G that the house should be experienced as one house and not as two, to a large

extend I hope they will turn their bedroom towards the new one and turn their actual understanding upside down.

The Spiral House and the old farm are proposing two opposite architectural regimes, one that was designed from a utilitarian point of view and the other from a hedonist and sensuous viewpoint. I think it is very amusing and intriguing to see how they are going to use it. They commissioned us to design the extension because they wanted to change their lifestyle, so I am curious to hear from them what will become their dearest room, the old or the new regime? Utilitarian or hedonist?

Because the Spiral House and the farm do not seek any compromise in their relationship and there is no indoor space in-between at any moment, one has to choose where to be: where to sit or sleep or sip a glass of wine? Practicality verses hedonism. It is a luxurious dilemma, but I am interested in the output.

If they move their bedroom it would really be a statement for them of a clear shift in their approach to life. The clients are a very busy people, their professional mobiles are always on and in every holiday travel hides a business appointment here or there. They live in the countryside but they have a hectic life with long working hours and a lot of traveling, obviously much more than what they wish. When they decided about the extension we strongly sensed that it was out of a desire to change their life and formalize it and we took this seriously. In the old house, even if they could still live there comfortably, its utilitarian architecture seemed to recall the burden of daily contingencies, whether it was theirs or those of the former farmer. The spaces of the Spiral House suggest a totally different attitude to the user; more distant and deliberate, where one can walk around with no purpose, sip a glass of wine, crash in the sofa and stare at the ceiling and feel good about it.

Architecture is an instrument that makes those fundamental changes possible and tangible. That is what fascinates us in architecture, especially when it is about housing. Cheap or expensive, it doesn't matter.

We will have to wait to see the finished product, because at the moment there are some functional obstructions due to the young age of the children and the necessity of proximity between their bedrooms.

Let's make an appointment in ten years and see what has happened.

[www.powerhouse-company.com](http://www.powerhouse-company.com)

[www.arquitectura-g.com](http://www.arquitectura-g.com)



Orchard Ladder No.1 designed by Paul Loebach

## UNDER THE SKY by ARQUITECTURA-G

Conversation with Tatiana Bilbao and Ekhi Lopetegi  
Photography by Iwan Baan

# CA GRAFICA

In a sequence of scenes from the film “F for Fake”, Orson Welles tells a story where Picasso notices a girl named Oja whom he seduces and takes back to his studio. She sits for him as he frantically paints a series of 22 nudes that she gets him to give her before she leaves. A few days later as he reads the paper, stingy Picasso learns of an art opening featuring 22 of his paintings which critics have hailed as a true renaissance for the painter. Picasso hurries to Paris to claim his share, as he had expressly prohibited the sale of the gift. As he enters the gallery he is surprised by the beauty of the paintings, but not as much as by the fact that they were not painted by him but rather were authored by Oja’s grandfather, a master art forger. Irritated, Picasso demands his originals only to find out from Oja that they no longer exist because her grandfather decided to burn them.

Beyond how the story may unfold we are drawn to the uncertainty generated by the act of burning originals: the uncertainty of what was only once an original but no longer as it does not exist and the uncertainty of what to now call something that used to be a copy.

For artist Gabriel Orozco, all of this is somehow embodied by “Casa Observatorio”. Built by the young architecture studio of Tatiana Bilbao (Mexico) in collaboration with Orozco, the house sits overlooking the Pacific Ocean in Puerto Escondido, Mexico.

As per the artist’s own wishes, the residence is an exact reproduction of one of the architectural pieces from the Jantar Mantar astronomical observatory in Delhi, India, built by Maharaja Jai Singh II of Jaipur from 1724 onwards. It is a simple cruciform construction made of concrete and wood with a large semispherical concavity in the center dividing the floor into four sections.

We find the house fascinating because it proposes many themes from different vantage points, among which we will mostly focus on the reproduction factor and its architectural consequences. With this in mind, we will use as introduction a text from “the Work of Art in the age of Mechanical Reproduction” (Walter Benjamin, 1936), then we have a conversation with Tatiana herself and once again with Ekhi Lopetegi, Ph.D. in Philosophy and musician.





**WALTER BENJAMIN**  
**THE WORK OF ART IN THE AGE OF**  
**MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION**

Preface  
 (...)

I

In principle a work of art has always been reproducible. Man-made artifacts could always be imitated by men. Replicas were made by pupils in practice of their craft, by masters for diffusing their works, and, finally, by third parties in the pursuit of gain. Mechanical reproduction of a work of art, however, represents something new. Historically, it advanced intermittently and in leaps at long intervals, but with accelerated intensity. The Greeks knew only two procedures of technically reproducing works of art: founding and stamping. Bronzes, terra cottas, and coins were the only art works which they could produce in quantity. All others were unique and could not be mechanically reproduced. With the woodcut graphic art became mechanically reproducible for the first time, long before script became reproducible by print. The enormous changes which printing, the mechanical reproduction of writing, has brought about in literature are a familiar story. However, within the phenomenon which we are here examining from the perspective of world history, print is merely a special, though particularly important, case. During the Middle Ages engraving and etching were added to the woodcut; at the beginning of the nineteenth century lithography made its appearance. With lithography the technique of reproduction reached an essentially new stage. This much more direct process was distinguished by the tracing of the design on a stone rather than its incision on a block of wood or its etching on a copperplate and permitted graphic art for the first time to put its products on the market, not only in large numbers as hitherto, but also in daily changing forms. Lithography enabled graphic art to illustrate everyday life, and it began to keep pace with printing. But only a few decades after its invention, lithography was surpassed by photography. For the first time in the process of pictorial reproduction, photography freed the hand of the most important artistic functions which henceforth devolved only upon the eye looking into a lens. Since the eye perceives more swiftly than the hand can draw, the process of pictorial reproduction was accelerated so enormously that it could keep pace with speech. A film operator shooting a scene in the studio captures the images at the speed of an actor's speech. Just as lithography virtually implied the illustrated newspaper, so did photography foreshadow the sound film. The technical reproduction of sound was tackled at the end of the last century. These convergent endeavors made predictable a situation which Paul Valéry pointed up in this sentence:

"Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs

in response to a minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign."

Around 1900 technical reproduction had reached a standard that not only permitted it to reproduce all transmitted works of art and thus to cause the most profound change in their impact upon the public; it also had captured a place of its own among the artistic processes. For the study of this standard nothing is more revealing than the nature of the repercussions that these two different manifestations – the reproduction of works of art and the art of the film – have had on art in its traditional form.

II

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence. This includes the changes which it may have suffered in physical condition over the years as well as the various changes in its ownership. The traces of the first can be revealed only by chemical or physical analyses which it is impossible to perform on a reproduction; changes of ownership are subject to a tradition which must be traced from the situation of the original.

The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity. Chemical analyses of the patina of a bronze can help to establish this, as does the proof that a given manuscript of the Middle Ages stems from an archive of the fifteenth century. The whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical – and, of course, not only technical – reproducibility. Confronted with its manual reproduction, which was usually branded as a forgery, the original preserved all its authority; not so vis-a-vis technical reproduction. The reason is twofold. First, process reproduction is more independent of the original than manual reproduction. For example, in photography, process reproduction can bring out those aspects of the original that are unattainable to the naked eye yet accessible to the lens, which is adjustable and chooses its angle at will. And photographic reproduction, with the aid of certain processes, such as enlargement or slow motion, can capture images which escape natural vision. Secondly, technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself. Above all, it enables the original to meet the beholder halfway, be it in the form of a photograph or a phonograph record. The cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art; the choral production, performed in an auditorium or in the open air, resounds in the drawing room.

The situations into which the product of mechanical reproduction can be brought may not touch the actual work of art, yet the quality of

its presence is always depreciated. This holds not only for the art work but also, for instance, for a landscape which passes in review before the spectator in a movie. In the case of the art object, a most sensitive nucleus – namely, its authenticity – is interfered with whereas no natural object is vulnerable on that score. The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object.

One might subsume the eliminated element in the term "aura" and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind. Both processes are intimately connected with the contemporary mass movements. Their most powerful agent is the film. Its social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage. This phenomenon is most palpable in the great historical films. It extends to ever new positions. In 1927 Abel Gance exclaimed enthusiastically:

"Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven will make films... all legends, all mythologies and all myths, all founders of religion, and the very religions... await their exposed resurrection, and the heroes crowd each other at the gate."

Presumably without intending it, he issued an invitation to a far-reaching liquidation.

III

During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well. The fifth century, with its great shifts of population, saw the birth of the late Roman art industry and the Vienna Genesis, and there developed not only an art different from that of antiquity but also a new kind of perception. The scholars of the Viennese school, Riegl and Wickhoff, who resisted the weight of classical tradi-

tion under which these later art forms had been buried, were the first to draw conclusions from them concerning the organization of perception at the time. However far-reaching their insight, these scholars limited themselves to showing the significant, formal hallmark which characterized perception in late Roman times. They did not attempt – and, perhaps, saw no way – to show the social transformations expressed by these changes of perception. The conditions for an analogous insight are more favorable in the present. And if changes in the medium of contemporary perception can be comprehended as decay of the aura, it is possible to show its social causes.

The concept of aura which was proposed above with reference to historical objects may usefully be illustrated with reference to the aura of natural ones. We define the aura of the latter as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch. This image makes it easy to comprehend the social bases of the contemporary decay of the aura. It rests on two circumstances, both of which are related to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life. Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things "closer" spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction. Unmistakably, reproduction as offered by picture magazines and newsreels differs from the image seen by the unarmed eye. Uniqueness and permanence are as closely linked in the latter as are transitoriness and reproducibility in the former. To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose "sense of the universal equality of things" has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction. Thus is manifested in the field of perception what in the theoretical sphere is noticeable in the increasing importance of statistics. The adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality is a process of unlimited scope, as much for thinking as for perception.

Source: UCLA School of Theater,  
 Film and Television  
 Transcribed by: Andy Blunden 1998

## ARQUITECTURA-G

Plagiarism means copying with the impossibility of reliving the moment of creation. Thus the copy becomes an empty object.

Architecture is intimately rooted to its function, to a time and place. When we copy it and de-contextualize it, we rob all this from it and it is left stripped of meaning.

In this case, one of the many architectural pieces from the Maharaja Jai Singh II observatory in Jaipur is reproduced and transformed into a residence. Replicating this piece in another context liberates it of meaning and renders it blank so it can acquire a different one.

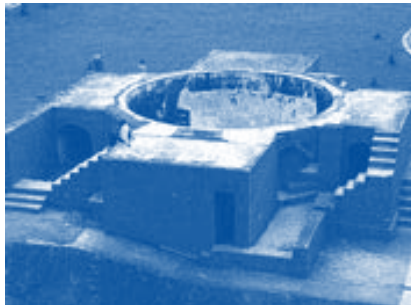
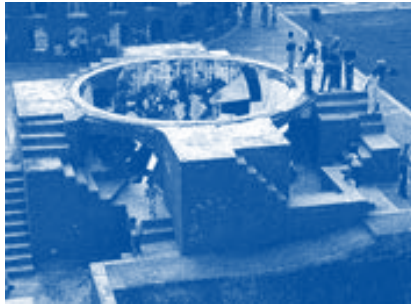
Does this produce a new self-identity or is it just a formal whim? Will the entire intellectual process leading up to this, more befitting of artistic production, all in all yield an architectural piece?

From another perspective, we stand before a good example of a summer house, properly rooted to its place though it has a completely foreign origin. The sections are independent and outward facing, with external areas for daily activities like bathing and eating. The interior-external relationship in the house is not intended to blur the architecture or de-materialize the border of what has been built. It is achieved in a more primitive fashion by turning out part of the plan to the outside. It is a matter of climate and the nature of summer or even vacation living.

The pool is of vital importance in the transformation of the nature of the house from its previous conception as an observatory. On the one hand, by filling the hemisphere with water and converting it into a pool, the original meaning is de-naturalized and the structure becomes domestic and summery. On the other hand, it is the central piece around which the residential sections are organized radially, thus forcing the circulation to the outside.

We believe that in this instance we transcend the traditional conception of place as well as the contextualization of the architecture added to it. But was this by accident?

As the house purports to “represent” the original observatory, it is understood that at first glance and as a product of this aestheticization, a displacement occurs that goes from what it is to occupy a space and “use” it or “practice” in it, to what it is to “see” or “contemplate” an object. Now, neither astronomical observatories nor houses are aesthetic objects per se: observatories are scientific research complexes and houses are organized residential and spatial complexes. Setting aside the possibility of the house perhaps also being an observatory in a different sense, we can say that here the “gesture” made manifest is one of an aesthetic materialization of both the scientific and the residential complexes. Postmodern architecture is often illustrated with examples where a similar displacement occurs, as for example a building shaped like a basket or like any figurative motif around which the intention is to organize hab-

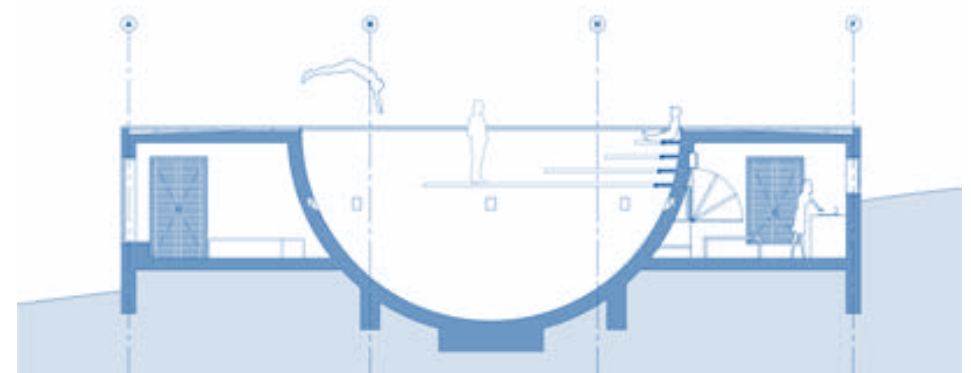


itability. Here, the original observatory, the scientific complex, is in fact the figurative motif governing over, at least partially, the construction of the house. I believe we can agree that Casa Observatorio “looks like” the Jaipur Observatory.

Generally speaking, architecture made only to be seen is branded as grandiose. And generally speaking, architecture claims to be engineering purely for the sake of the pragmatic. Such is the quintessential modern architectural ideal. However, it would be a fallacy to believe in an exclusively functional architecture of a sort of functional purity. Any construction functions both as an example of spatial organization and as an aesthetic object to be contemplated that produces an “aesthetic experience”. This is why architecture magazines include more than just scale drawings, floor plans and diagrams to illustrate houses, and usually have a “spectacular” shot of the façade or something along those lines.

Any architectural construction is an aesthetic “object” simultaneously experienced as such and as a residential complex. In this sense, architecture often becomes iconic, meaning that it turns into a symbol or it is granted a symbolic meaning. It is debatable whether every house is “a priori” a symbol or if it is only “a posteriori” that the house-machine becomes a “representational object”. Without delving too much into detail, or discussing whether or not “every architectural construction is an aesthetic object” (I believe some examples in history do not square with that definition, at least not immediately), suppose we at least agree that in the era known as Modernity it is not unusual for the reception of an architectural construction to take place in the form of aesthetic contemplation nor is it rare for us to experience this event.

The first distinguishing trait of Casa Observatorio is that it brings to light all these complex relationships between functionality and the aesthetic experience. What experience does the house bring forward? The experience one has of the observatory is not a scientific one but rather an aesthetic experience brought on by observing the sky. According to Gabriel Orozco himself, water, the fundamental protagonist of the house, functions when it is still and does not flow, like a mirror. Therefore, this “observatory” leads to the observation of the sky as it appears symbolically reflected on the watery surface of the pool. Through this game of reflections the water doubles into the sky and the sky into the water. Through this doubling, the concavity of the pool stands before another great concave form: the celestial cavity. Because the roof of the house acts as the horizontal plane, it becomes extended into the very horizon a propos to which it was placed. This horizontality is perhaps the building’s main line of force. Now, the house as a horizon exists in the same fold as the one between sky and water, the same boundary or area at the aperture-fold between the sky and the house. Horizon, house, and sky: together forming a receptive complex. Is such receptivity



questionable from a volumetric vantage point? Is the house an open volume, is its geometry dynamic and open? It could be argued that the fact that it has been surrendered as a figurative motif is not necessarily an obstacle for this to be true. Pure geometry could argue that the symmetric and closed “cross floor plan” was in fact conceived as a static and not dynamic form. Suppose we set this discussion aside, as it is separate from the house and its purposes that are more symbolic than they are formal. I think we can agree that the formation or the moment of happening for this receptive complex occurs at a symbolic level.

But not just that. Since its center is taken, the house “expels” residents from a center to which they have no access. The centrifugal nature of the house organizes the possible uses of space. The facilities as well as the circulation routes are established on the margins of the house and in some sense they are in themselves marginal. Why? Because just as the pool establishes a connection with the sky, placing the house outside of itself, so are the inhabitants expelled out and into the margins of the house—the horizontal surface of the observatory—and forced to reside, meaning “make use of”, this symbolic receptive space made up of the observatory-horizon-sky triad. The residents are tossed out, or rather “tucked in”, to this engrossing and receptive place. On the whole, I believe the house speaks of (1) the non-private and therefore public nature of residential spaces, where the possibility of a private life is snatched from under us, forcing us to be exposed to the exterior (the house has no “interior”); and (2) the receptive and hospitable nature of an exterior space comprised by reciprocal sky-observatory reflections that fold out into the horizon like a third dimension and creating a symbolically receptive space where we go through the aesthetic experience of feeling tucked in and in some sense protected (however exposed).

#### TATIANA BILBAO

Working through this project as an aesthetic decision led me to imagine the path to its ultimate execution. The decision to “reproduce” a space designed to be an observatory, to de-contextualize it and “use” it with a completely different function in my mind could only be feasible if it was an aesthetic decision to begin with. As this was in fact true and, as he was quick to point out, considering that we felt like we were personally taking on part of Gabriel’s work, it was difficult to question from a perspective of architecture, of the resulting space. Without a doubt, reproduction, de-contextualization and change of function remained our core goals and through them the space would eventually take up an identity of its own. In terms of authenticity, since Gabriel’s practice mostly deals with the use of objects, elements, spaces and sensation- inducing scenarios, the extreme detachment of his work from today’s I.T. era where everything has a “logical reason” of being is also obvious as such. The fact that it is the reproduction of something ceases to be our problem as its “aura” now resides elsewhere. The same thing happens exactly when we go see a movie featuring a reproduced landscape, as we do not expect to see or capture the “aura” generated by the original landscape as experienced live, but rather one based on filmic reproduction, storyline, camera perspective and character direction. Herein resides the “aura” of this house. As much as the actual use of these objects, elements and moments is the validating point in Gabriel’s practice, the established sensations associated to an object, in this case, are the artist’s primary concern. I could have never fathomed the result because through the process for me space had been just that, an aesthetic decision as part of an artistic practice based on the creation of sensations rooted

on the everyday, reproduction and the use of something that already exists. Only once the piece stood executed and able to lapse into its everyday did it as an object become an inhabitable space, and only then was I able to understand it as an architectural piece. The transformation in perception took place when it was understood that the space perfectly responded to the family habits and purposes. As soon as I saw the “object” as used and inhabited, the “symbolic” space quickly became the everyday space the family was accustomed to reside. The house that seems to expel its inhabitants from its center manages to produce a familiar experience for every one of its inhabitants. For example, this family is used to going camping together through the different beaches of the Mexican Republic, mostly up and down this particular extension of the Pacific coast. Suddenly, here they have a place where they can emulate their past experience, only in a much more sedentary way. In a campsite, private space becomes remarkably reduced and “expels” you from its interior as it encourages any activity outside of itself. The strictly intimate activities are relegated to this space, but everything else is experienced in reference to its context, the sky, the horizon. In a campsite, the “residents” relate directly with their environment; the social dynamic becomes increasingly collective as many of the activities are shared, both the intimate and more socially interpersonal events. The cohabitation space integrates to the site, something we see in the house. The intimate activities, the bedrooms, are what the tent is to the campsite, articulated by an observation and recreational unit conveying coherence and meaning to both space and activity and therefore defining the everyday. In terms of its function, the house incorporates the iconic facet of architecture, defined as such because it responds to a function.

#### ARQUITECTURA-G

As we discuss Gabriel Orozco’s relationship to authorship, we remember that the authorship of the house belongs to no one. Although the artist includes the house in his practice, there is no question of there being an original construction, Orozco’s decision to reproduce it and Tatiana’s task of adapting it and building it. Therefore, the final result would not have been possible had it not been for its three “parents”. The relationships in Orozco’s work are established by the choice of an element, a priori, that is then transformed and presented as something removed from its original condition, retaining its chosen recognizable element and thus producing a particular sensation for the spectator. We do not believe this to lead us to the destruction of the aura that Benjamin speaks of, but to a “superimposition of auras”. When a non-serial piece is reproduced, whatever its condition, and the resulting copy is an element so similar to the original it could potentially replace it, we then convene that the result is an insubstantial object. Now, in this house the purpose is not to create an identical copy, as the new house will have its own “here and now” purpose to it. However, as the result is so geometrically similar to the original, one resists losing the sensations provoked by the same. This culminates in a superimposed aura cohabitation that clearly contributes an added value to the residence. In terms of the permanence of the aura, instead alluding to cinematography as Tatiana did we could allude to contemporary music, mostly electronic: musicians use samples and become part of a song so they can de-contextualize it and construct around it a new theme where we can identify what has been sampled as cohabitating with the artist’s superimposed creation. However, we also want to delve into the symbolic connotations of the house. As compared to the displacement operating in some postmodern pieces mentioned by Ekhi—where an object with

a clearly denotative meaning was taken from the collective unconscious and transposed onto a building—this house goes further than that whether or not it intended to do so. The building is based on an original construction devoted to the observation of the sky, the investigation of the unknown in a necessarily nocturnal setting, and was (still is) a machine designed to bring us closer to the stars and the intangible. In this sense, its line of environmental interaction is essentially vertical. On the other hand, its Greek cross floor plan connotes horizontality and an earth-oriented aperture. In any case, it is not a symbol of a religious event but of a search of what transcends us. And speaking of the cruciform floor plan, we would like to ask Tatiana to discuss another element of great symbolism: its orientation, whether it responds to the original, to the place where the house can be found. We have also observed with interest the centrifugal nature of the residence, as it provides for an absence of interior diagonal views that enables an atypical aesthetic experience but mostly because the very residence is forced out to the perimeters. Notwithstanding the upper levels, that is, on the ground floor, a clear hierarchy is established: 1. An unattainable center, 2. The bedrooms, 3. The exterior spaces in between the bedrooms and 4. The region of uncertainty immediately adjacent to the house. One could argue that such a clear hierarchy between the sections is something less befitting of contemporary architecture, but we would not hesitate to qualify the residence as such. I would like to hear your opinions about this.

#### TATIANA BILBAO

Although the house has a significant vertical line of interaction I would say that, as opposed to the observatory, it finds its essence interacting with context rather than sky. We oriented the cross by taking the axis of the house and replacing it on the only two points that define the site: one lone palm tree on a parcel of land (as a curious anecdote, the day we finished our sketch we saw a maguay flower in full bloom and competing with the palm tree) and the centre point of a number of rocks on the more remote parts of the parcel by the sea (see attached image).

I think that the entrenchment of the house to the site comes from the strategic strokes performed by its compositional elements. As Ekhi said, the house possesses a centrifugal force that expels itself to the outside, however sustaining an important attraction to the center. Because of the great force of the unattainable center, this house gets us closer to the earth than to the heavens. The fact that the bottom areas of the house are destined to be “inhabited” gets us to experience it much like we experience the earth, as it pulls us towards the center and the unknown it represents. This is what it is to be experienced, being marginally surrounded and admired from another place. I would not say that the house is less than residential; as I mentioned before the fact that it allows the family enjoy their routines confers it a residential disposition.

#### ARQUITECTURA-G

Beyond its intrinsic symbolism, we totally agree and believe the house to be both suitable and enjoyable as a residence. We never doubted its functionality and architectonic potential. This is why we are attracted to the idea of retaking and bringing into crisis the concept of architecture as something singular and

unique, because the house proves this fact as much as it does not. An architect colleague of ours owns a parcel of land in La Rioja, a prairie surrounded by trees and a continuous contour line. Just about every day, a number of people confess to him their desire to build an exact replica of Villa Savoye on his land. The conversation always starts on a light note and quickly turns into a jigsaw puzzle, as we never arrive to a convincing line of reasoning against the idea of building it. In fact, we believe it would be interesting. Le Corbusier himself imagined and sketched out a prairie brimming with Villa Savoyes. Such is our friend’s personal desire. He simply likes it, he cannot think of a better residence to build and he knows of no higher aesthetic experience than the one proposed by the Villa. Having processed this, suppose he has his exact replica built. What happens now when the Villa Savoye kitchen is deemed too far out into a marginal corner because it was meant for the help? What if he decides to change it and expose it to the patio? Surely just this would spoil the charm and the idea of living inside an exact replica 70 years and 1,000 km away from its original site. However, what if instead of changing the kitchen he decides to adapt more and more things to the point of re-interpreting it into something closer to Villa Dall’Alva...? At any rate, this can only happen in stand-alone houses that function as living machines and not at the Casa Ugalde

by Coderch, as an example, as this would simply make no sense. An exact copy of Villa Savoye could indeed provide a pleasant life and a complete aesthetic experience, just like Mies Van der Rohe’s Barcelona pavilion does. However, what part of it would be considered architecture?

#### TATIANA BILBAO

I think it’s a great idea. I also think that building a copy of Villa Savoye would be an incredible experiment.

I sincerely believe that in the past 70 years life has changed almost as radically as I felt the passage of time at the Observatory in India when I was there. We are discussing the aura again, but I believe that here Walter Benjamin’s reference is particularly fitting. Will the uses and customs of the house perhaps change as things change through the centuries? I also consider the amount of architecture in something a subject worthy of discussion. As a matter of fact, one of the constants of my every day entails wondering how much architecture there is in what I do. Sometimes, case in point Casa Observatorio, we believe there is none and then suddenly one day everything about it becomes architecture to us. At this juncture we would need to start defining architecture, a scarcely productive turn for us to take at the moment. We might as well discuss Villa Malaparte, in Capri, which I start to use as an “original” object and end up replicating sensations and transporting them to the site. How much architecture would there be in this, I wonder?

#### EKHI LOPETEGI

Many questions have been raised. They are difficult to resolve but rich in content. First, we have the question of the “aura” and how it is juggled within Casa Observatorio. Now, I will get a bit theoretical as I focus on the interplay between repetition and difference.

I believe that the issue of the replaceability of something lies at the gleaming core of the aura conundrum. We say that something has an aura when it is irreplaceable, that is, when it



cannot be substituted by its analog version and it is not equal to something else. And so, as Benjamin says, an aura will always surround itself by ritual and thus it will dissolve when the totality of things occur in the form of their general equivalency. Within the Marxist theory that Benjamin uses as springboard, money is the commodity that renders the rest of the commodities more or less equivalent to each other. When the totality of things composing reality (whether people or houses or resources) appears to us in the shape of commodity, this general equivalence principle could be extended to said totality. To be singular and irreplaceable, that is, to be endowed with this aura in principle comes into direct conflict with the capitalist mode of interchange. Within the work and production fronts, the serial production of an object is the translation of this equivalence principle that snubs a priori the irreplaceable nature of things.

What happens in Casa Observatorio? I believe we sensed it when someone mentioned the “superimposition of auras”. No repetition generated anything analogous or equivalent to an original observatory. Some people say that repeating a stroke is pretty much unproductive because it does not engage novelty. In this sense, the repetition of the original observatory is productive in that it conveys novelty. It is not an analogous or equivalent repetition nor is it the repetition of a gesture or replaceable object, but rather stands a unique production and reproduction. Why? Because under no circumstances is Casa Observatorio a mere equivalent of the Jaipur observatory. In this sense, the original/copy duality bursts into new and inconspicuous meanings within Benjamin’s text. For Benjamin, such a burst brings us closer to a world where reproductions are would-be copies that do not recognize the originals whence they came. However, the resulting Casa Observatorio is not the repetition of two originals, that is, of two singular and irreplaceable objects. For Nietzsche, repetition is active rather than reactive and it implies a future (here, a re-signifying process) that newness produces in a radical sense. In short, it is a repetition that creates new conditions. Herein resides the entirety of its richness.

But not just any reproduction anywhere can do this. Architecture as a discipline is closely connected to technical reproduction. A modern building will not reveal the characteristic unique stroke of an artist’s painted picture. The decision made by Nouvel to preserve some of the remaining debris and the notes of the workers on the concrete is based on wanting to provide some trace of singularity (lacking, a priori, in the building’s actual production). Also through sheer use an ordinary apartment becomes stained by its residents’ tracks and traces and acquires a singularity that renders it unique. However, I believe that a series of semi-detached villas will repeat and not create novelty. Although in Manhattan there are different



buildings, they remain analogous or equivalent to each other. Would the reproduction of Villa Savoye yield a new and singular object or no more than a futile cardboard reproduction? Only if said reproduction implies a re-signification (sampling) process yielding a new and singular object. I believe Casa Observatorio to fulfill this condition. We can add to the list of traits of the house that it brings to light the complex relationships between repetition and differentiation, the reproduction and production of novelty and the creation of an “added value” that renders the house a rich and unique object.

#### ARQUITECTURA-G

We do appreciate the Malaparte house reference here at the very end, considering it was probably in the back of our minds through the length of the conversation, not to mention the first image we associated to Casa Observatorio the first time we saw it. We believe they share many things. Both of their architectures are remarkably visible, hiding nothing and plotting out landscape a bit arrogantly. As they both adequately follow procedure, aka common sense, they are both equally rooted to their land and they both enrich and give meaning to nature, not unlike a lighthouse or a beachside bar. They are both reference points and provide their site with a reading based on their placement somewhere between the known and infinity. The abstract planarity of all the decks also plays an important role, as this order of things cannot be found elsewhere on the natural landscapes of their surroundings. You climb some steps suddenly you feel in charge of your residence. Both of them are residences that somehow encourage tucked and protected living and exterior life. Also, climbing to the very top of either one of them entails complete exposure to the immensity of the horizon.

Perhaps Koolhaas has essentially already proved with “Casa da Música” that architecture is an intellectual exercise where what counts is the result and the processes are interchangeable. We can endow things with new meanings divorced from anything as originally conceived, as long as somehow this stands addressed, to paraphrase Ekhi’s re-signification or sampling process. See the music of artists like John Talabot. Maybe everything will start to become much clearer to us once our friend gets around constructing the new Villa Savoye...

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# DRINKING GLASSES



ART DIRECTION BY OMAR SOSA  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY NACHO ALEGRE & ALBERT FOLCH  
EDITED BY LAURA ALCALDE

Shot glass by Luminarc at Vinçon, vintage water glass at La Trocante, vintage champagne short glass at La Trocante, open glass plate and Blanda bowl, both at Ikea