

WE HAVE WEAPONS TOO

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There is a connection between popular architecture and the late 20th century deconstructivism, that also links design, improvisation, transfer of technology and recycling. Architecture for emergency could take some valuable clues from it.

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IMPROVISATION AND ARCHITECTURE

On some occasions the only capable alternative for articulating a creative argument is improvisation. As Frank Gehry's home in Santa Monica demonstrates, improvisation is not necessarily banal or arbitrary processes but the result of a continuous and patient reflection that allows for an alternative reading of *genius*.

"If you come to my place I will welcome you with a naked gun; we have weapons too". It was with this spontaneity that Jose, leader of one of the local clans, received the police officers that initiated the removal and demolition, in September 2007, of the shanty town El Cañaverl in the Vicálvaro district of Madrid, better known as The Jungle. The demolition workers continued their work with security guards and feared for the worst, although the day ended with few incidents: only slaps and rubber pellets.

According to that year's census¹, around 1,084 families occupied the outskirts of Madrid in 1,325 *chabolas*² distributed in various settlements of social emergency. These dwellings shared space with legal, prefabricated homes, with a deal to rent monthly arranged by the Empresa Municipal de la Vivienda EMV. The Jungle of Vicálvaro was created in 1988, as a relocation camp for a hundred families that came from the dismantling of another similar settlement called *Los Focos* (the light bulbs). Besides the normal prefabricated modules, the settlement grew to include a children's school, an adult-education group and a special team for the prevention of delinquency. The majority of inhabitants were vendors of fruit or scrap metal. It was completely dismantled in April 2009.³

In 1988, the same year as The Jungle's creation, the MoMA opened the exposition *Deconstructivist Architecture*, curated by Phillip Johnson and Mark Wigley. At that time, the first was the founding director of the Architecture and Design department of the New York museum and the other was a young professor at Princeton. Deconstructivist Architecture confronted, appropriately and tentatively, a selection of paintings, sculpture, photography and books created between 1913 and 1933 by Russian constructivists, El Lissitzky, Malevitch, Popova, Rodchenko, the Vesnin brothers and Tatlin, among others, by means of recycling the museum's own archives. To this, they added a succulent display of architecture with drawings and models of 10 projects by 7 architects: Peter Eisenman, Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas, Daniel Libeskind, Bernard Tschumi and Coop Himmel(b)lau⁴. As we know now, parallels were drawn as evidenced by the formal and visual similarities with the warped plans of Tatlin and the suspended elements in the void by Hadid; or the diagonal superim-

positions of rectangular and trapezoidal forms of Rodchenko and Coop Himmel(b)lau; with the points, lines and planes of Tschumi, or the more obvious axonometric of Koolhaas, to give some examples. According to the curators, while some proposals were meant to be precarious and experimental, the others were developed to be built; some, according to Phillip Johnson and his "the old modernist eye" are pure images of the old International Style and the other warped images of deconstructivist architecture.

Johnson illustrated the cover of the exposition catalogue with the image of ball bearings, that was used as the cover of the *Machine Art* exhibition of 1934, and with a photograph by Michael Heizer that depicted an old, rundown shed built in the 1860's to protect a spring on his land in the Nevada desert. With the image Johnson alluded, not without irony, to an architecture designed anonymously and without aesthetic ends or pedigree and to a certain point, improvised. Johnson, himself, also invoked another celebrated exposition by Bernard Rudofsky, *Architecture without architects*, in which the architecture itself was developed from the creative architectural processes of the strictest sense (Rudofsky, 1964).

Without trying to go into depth here on the elaborate discipline and deep architectural debate of architecture and philosophy in the 70's and 80's with respect to cosmology and deconstructivism⁵, thus focusing on the specific aims of the exhibit (directed not only to an elite public), it may enough to highlight the will of the curators to bring out the rebel stamp of the architects shown in search of an apparent instability, that gives a sensation of collapse. Wigley said it perfectly in the first lines of his essay accompanying the catalogue: "Architecture has always been a central cultural institution that has valued order and stability over everything. These qualities are understood as a product of geometric purity of formal composition [...] The projects of this exposition trace a different sensibility, one in which the dream of the pure form has been disturbed. The form has been contaminated. The dream has been transformed to a kind of nightmare" (Johnson, 1988).

If Wigley articulated the deconstructionist argument, for Johnson, that old modernist armed with a vision free from theoretical compromises –and thusly maybe more accurate– was obvious, and it was then, that Heizer's photo connected unsettlingly but evidently with a particular project showcased, maybe the seminal one: the Santa Monica house built between 1978 and 1988 by a young Frank Gehry. In effect, as the curators assured, beneath a radical appearance, projects like Gehry's were essentially traditional forms, inverted and displaced. The capacity of architecture to disorient the spectator and produce a shock were exemplified in this strange house, a kind of coverage of broken forms and unconventional materials out of context.⁶

As Alejandro Zaera-Polo remembers, the work of Gehry from the seventies marks his potential for integrating mass-produced and uses them at the same time not only in the capacity of subverting traditional aesthetic but setting a new distance from them due to a different use to the expected. It would be even possible to state that this new position was far from conventional decency. The young Gehry worked with low-cost and industrial materials; showed a highlighted interest in recycling and transfer of technology or in the so-called low-tech close to chain-link⁷, corrugated metal or cardboard; many times completing the work just installing raw, unprocessed materials. Under this view and work methodology, the basic materials are converted into finished materials (Zaera-Polo, 1990), with which new creative processes were established that utilize improvisation and confidence in the sensibility as alternative to the habitual channels of project, more reflective and hierarchical.

In this area, the de-contextualized use of the materials, the unexpected discovery because a non-designed artifact and the resource at recycling or reutilization operations, drive us to a parallel reading that share strategies with Claes Oldenburg or John Cage and that, although usually relegated to a vague second plane, seek to elevate improvisational processes to an aesthetic category (Smith, 1997). It is not trivial that on one of his first public appearances, Gehry himself spoke of his work in Santa Monica as “my house and an open composition”.⁸

Open composition or improvisation are terms that evoke, almost irremediably, towards other mythic improvisations generated under the influence of the Californian coast, like that carried out by John Cage in those years, not far from Heizer's shed. On that occasion, in 1975, and during the tour with the Cunningham Dance Company, one of the dancers approached John Cage with a dry cactus. He put it close to his ear and plucked its spines, making the sound as if they were the strings of an instrument. This new sonority was later utilized by the composer in mythic pieces for percussion like *Child of Tree* (1975) or *Branches* (1976), as well as consolidated a whole trajectory that utilized improvisation as an artistic discipline, by means of object out of context, converted into instruments.

It is obvious that the improvisation has traditionally been a denied phenomenon and of frequent derogatory connotation, mostly in the western context, but is also evident that post-modernity has offered a new opportunity to it. Today, along new parameters like arbitrariness, it is integrated in the creative process within the artistic domain. It is not the improvisational logic, if it can be defined as such, an isolated or excluded phenomenon: it often accompanies artists of profound intellectual formation. According to its etymological meaning, to improvise is to “make something immediately, without study or preparation”. However this does not necessarily deny previous formation, as the Frenchman Jean-Joseph Jacotot in his *Philosophical essay on improvisation* (1846), anticipated in stating “improvisation is evidently an acquired talent. Who can see genius here?”

It is not, in effect, something trivial. On occasions, and especially under limited circumstances of emergency or social exclusion, it is fitting to think of improvisation as a sole alternative capable of completely articulating the creative argument, whose material of work reaches only the available or residual. It is then when the genius, through his “great disposition to patience”⁹ (Jacotot, 1846) and the continuous exercise of composing, druid of the reflexive study of the best models, can make his work fruitful, more than convert itself in an ostentation of rules, most of which arbitrary (Capmany, c. 1820).

Gehry's house, in itself, acts as a manifesto of this continuous exercise of additive composition and extreme creative liberty, reinventing the existing and through an interesting linguistic reversal, looks like one of those *ready mades*¹⁰ with which the great geniuses disturbed the intellectuals and laypeople. On the other hand, the history of the house is fairly well known. The first intervention of this home, that Gehry transformed over time, began in 1978 when the architect sought to restructure, with minimal resources, the little pink house his second wife, Berta, had bought. However, and since then, the house has suffered continual transformations, not all praiseworthy. Today it is difficult to recognize some of the qualities that made it special when it was built.¹¹

That young Gehry, not worried about the concept of branding that would later place him on the global scene, transformed an ordinary house into a masterpiece. The architectural processes began then the self-construction, which profoundly disgusted

their neighbors, that maybe didn't want their neighborhood transformed into an area architecturally degraded. Gehry's answer to the complaints of his neighbors was: “And what do you have to say about the boat parked in your driveway? And what about the motor home? It is the same material and the same aesthetic” (Cohn, 1990).

However, the arguments of the architect failed to convince his neighbors, who were so enraged by the appearance of the new house that one night, in wild-west fashion, gathered fiercely in front of the house to gun it down. **ARQ**

- 1 Census realized by the *Instituto de Realojamiento e Integración Social* IRIS.
- 2 In Spain, shanty towns (Translator's note).
- 3 The relocation of El Cañaveral was included in an ambitious city operation, beginning in 1986, which consisted in dismantling all the populated slums of the Madrid outskirts and relocate the inhabitants in official social housing before 2011. See: “Relocation of the Slums of El Cañaveral”, newspaper *El Mundo*, September 25, 2007 and “La Cañada does not figure into the Madrid plan to do away with the slums”, newspaper *El País*, October 30, 2008.
- 4 The exhibited projects were: Rooftop Remodeling –Vienna, 1985–, Apartment Building –Vienna, 1986– y Skyline –Hamburg, 1985– by Coop Himmel(l)blau; Biocenter for the University of Frankfurt –Frankfurt am Main, 1987– by Peter Eisenman; Gehry House –Santa Monica, 1978-1988– and Familian House –Santa Monica, 1978– by Frank Gehry; The Peak –Hong Kong, 1982– by Zaha Hadid; Building and Tower –Rotterdam, 1982– by Rem Koolhaas; City Edge –Berlin, 1987– by Daniel Libeskind; and Parc de La Villette –Paris, 1982-1985– by Bernard Tschumi.
- 5 We send the reader to the bibliography, where we provide an ample selection that can serve as reference. Especially interesting is the chapter of the book by Fredric Jameson where the discussion of Frank Gehry's Santa Monica house are precisely articulated.
- 6 The astonished commentary by the neighbors produced by the house is interesting. Some of the appeared to be compiled by the architect himself in the article “Beyond Function”. *Design Quarterly magazine* N° 138, p. 2-11.
- 7 The author links these materials to *poor-tech* instead of *low-tech* (Translator's note).
- 8 The first intervention was barely finished when the Santa Monica house began to receive attention from specialized publications. The Japanese *GA Houses* N° 6 was one of the first magazines to recognize the foreign work in October 1979.
- 9 Count of Buffon, Georges-Louis Leclerc (1707-1788) famous quote.
- 10 The Spanish original uses the French *objets trouvés* (Translator's note).
- 11 Obviously the house continues the long Californian tradition of promoting prefabrication and the use of industrialized materials, perfectly exemplified in the celebrated program Case Study Houses of the 1950's. To see them, consulte the book by Elizabeth Smith, *Case Study Houses: the complete CSH program 1945-1966* (Taschen, 2002).

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