

Back in the Caves

Albert Palazon



Fig. 1 Towhee bunting and egg. Drawn from nature by A. Wilson, engraved by A. Lawson.

Hummingbirds are master crafters. They are true nest builders. Their skills in the field of architecture are simply astonishing. These hummingbirds build a tiny, knot-like structure attached to a tree branch with spider silk. The nest structure is crafted from bark, leaf strands and silk fibers, which make it strong and stretchable. The nest is covered on the outside with lichen for camouflage and lined on the inside with hair or feathers for insulation. A craftsman heritage that helped their species survive while provided a solution to a very specific need.

The nest building tradition among hummingbirds comes from thousands of years ago. In actual fact, these tiny flying creatures were already building such developed architectures while us humans were still living in caves. Recalling the beginnings of human race, it is interesting to notice that the first nomad communities in the prehistoric times did not design or build their living environments. Their survival would depend on their ability on “finding architecture”: interpreting a place and adapting to it. Inside the sheltered space of a cave, a flat surface could be seen as a sleeping spot or a gathering place; a crack on the rock could become a fireplace or maybe room for storage. Architecture was in the eye of the beholder.

As opposed to the bird’s nest which represents the achievement of an “ideal” design with a very specific purpose, the cave is an ambiguous place that ena-

bles the user to solve his needs in a flexible manner. Caves made us develop a basic framework and sense in the whole process of adaptability, which became the basis of what we today call “Architecture”. This analogy: nest (Planned environment) versus cave (Adaptive environment), as a depiction of two different paradigms, was the starting point of Sou Fujimoto’s conference in the light of the “Seminario de Montevideo 13” on October 2012 in Uruguay. Fujimoto’s thoughts on the adaptable aspects of indeterminate places give clues about the true nature of contemporary architecture. Could architecture be much more detached from the traditional notion of client-architect-commission that we have? Do architects have a significant role in that scenario?

In the year 2012, the photographer Iwan Baan together with urban think tank studio were awarded with the golden lion at the Venice biennale for the graphic depiction of a vertical self-made favela growing in the fabric of an abandoned skyscraper in central Caracas. Their series of pictures gave vivid evidence of how users create architectures interacting with their surrounding contexts.

The “Torre de David” project proved that architecture doesn’t only need to be the act of designing a place but, most importantly, having the ability to read it in order to dwell it. London based artist Nadav Kander highlights the same reality on human adaptability by



Fig. 2 Torre David – gran horizonte



Fig. 3 Chongqing IV. Sunday Picnic
vimeo.com/29879295



Fig. 4 Quinta Monroy Chile by Alejandro Aravena and Elemental Studio 2011

means of his photo series taken along his three yearlong Yangtze River photo project: Sunday Picnic at Chongqing is a revealing picture of how a humble family can transform the residual space under a massive concrete motorway into an impressive daytime living room by the river.

From my humble perspective, not that many architects have shown awareness of people's volatile needs and adaptation skills. Even fewer have used that knowledge as a design tool. In the year 2003, Alejandro Aravena together with Elemental studio carried out a shocking housing experiment at Quinta Monroy, Chile. The core concept of their project was to design a housing complex which would allow users to expand their own homes and inhabit their places in a personal way. One could argue that Quinta Monroy in Chile reproduces the same social phenomenon of the "Torre de David" under a planned environment by the author. Aravena's proposal produced an incredibly rich and successful outcome. The project was flexible enough to allow an assorted variety of situations in it. Its main strength consisted of accepting the fact that adaptation is part of survival. It is fascinating to observe how buildings and spaces drastically evolve over time and get away from their original function. That natural process is strongly related to both the notion of "cave architecture" and the notion of adaptation as a mean to survival.

Giles Gilbert Scott was a brilliant English architect of the early XXth century. His work comprises relevant buildings such as the Liverpool Cathedral, the Battersea Power Station or the old Bankside power station in London. He mastered the art of brickwork and was the author of some of the most valuable industrial architectures of the last century. Little could Gilbert Scott have ever imagined that, long after his death, the Bankside power station would eventually become the new international cathedral of contemporary art; now vastly known as "the Tate Modern". Aware of it or not, Gilbert Scott designed a super structure which was flexible enough to house any possible scenario. Herzog and De Meuron, the Swiss team which led the renovation for the Tate modern, saw the opportunities in the original fabric. A stigmatized nonfunctional brick

power station became one of the most significant cultural and urban landmarks in Europe. The Tate Modern is an excellent example of what adaptation is: an essential process necessary in every ecosystem, environment or architecture that aims to stay alive.

Modern life evolves faster than ever. We, architects, must understand that contemporary architecture has to be adaptable to a constant change. There is an increasing necessity of designing buildings that can have multiple lives, buildings which can cope with almost any situation and guarantee a future adaptation. At the end of the day, a very specific need required by a specific client is only a fleeting situation in time. For that reason, I believe the role of the client is slowly fading away in favor of both users and designers. An architecture that doesn't want to expire cannot be defined by a single client's need. Many other future clients, users and even architects will have to find new opportunities in a building that aspires to be long lasting. We will perish and die, but our buildings will be left behind in the fabric of our cities, and they will have many other future lives, some of which will be surprisingly unexpected. Bear in mind the "Torre de David", the Bankside power station or Quinta Monroy in Chile.

Let's leave things open and flowing. Maybe we should just project architectures more like "caves", where nothing is ever meticulously designed, but there is always a chance to find shelter and a "home" in them.

Albert Palazon (Barcelona 1987) is an architect, 3d artist and music producer from Barcelona based in Madrid. He works as a project architect at Mansilla+Tuñón studio since 2012. (Nowadays called Emilio Tuñón architects: emiliotunon.com). Albert Palazon was trained as an architect at the Architecture School of Barcelona (ETSAB), the Edinburgh College of Art in Scotland and the Faculty of Architecture in Montevideo, Uruguay (FARQ, Udelar). During his studies, he got involved in different architecture practices, such as Enric Ruiz Geli's interdisciplinary team at cloud 9 Barcelona. In 2012 he was awarded with the Arquia Foundation National Scholarship competition which led him to Madrid. He has won various competitions as a team member at Emilio Tuñón architects, as well as he has been mentioned at European 13 Finland or Asemas national master thesis contest under his own name. He is currently working on his next music album, which will soon see the light.

Fig. 1 American Ornithology; or The Natural History of the Birds of the United States by Alexander Wilson

Fig. 2 Photo Iwan Baan

Fig. 3 Photo Nadav Kander

Fig. 4 Photo Cristobal Palma