

A Portrait of Stone

Laura Bonell and Daniel López-Dòriga



1 In Google Maps his house is described as „Sir John Soane’s Museum. Former home of eccentric art collector”.

A person stands in the middle of an old structure and marvels at what once was a home:

At the audacity of its natural enclave,
At the scenography of its exteriors,
At the wise use of its materials,
At the bold combination of its elements,
At the proportions of its spaces.

It was built 80, 200, 2000 years ago. Its owner was its creator was its user. It was a house made for oneself. Or was it oneself turned into a house? *“This house, my portrait of stone. A house that looks like me, or said in another way, a house like me. But which me?”*

Upon reading on Curzio Malaparte’s words, a very specific kind of client emerges: that who does not need of an architect to project the way he will live. In other words, if there is an architect, he is not important. While it is not uncommon for clients to impose their wishes on the spaces they are going to inhabit, often to their architects’ disbelieves, rarely does the result manage to generate consensus and go on to become a lasting piece of architecture, a masterpiece, admired by future generations. The idea that a person’s character can be set on stone, that ideals can be translated into living spaces speaks of the genuine personality of these creators/clients.

I

The oldest example that comes to mind is emperor Hadrian, who projected Villa Adriana for himself on the 2nd century AD. In “Memoirs of Hadrian”, Marguerite Yourcenar imagines him writing: *“Each building stone was the strange concretion of a will, a memory, and sometimes a challenge. Each structure was the chart of a dream.”*

Having been a conqueror, a traveller, a nomad, he envisioned his own house as his final encampment; tents and pavilions made of jasper, porphyry and obsidian.

II

Sir John Soane greatly admired the remains of the villa when he visited it as part of his Grand Tour of Italy. The opulent marbles were long gone, and all there was left were the brick structures of what once was, but the top-lit ruined vaults left a lasting impression on him.

In spite of him being a renowned architect of his time, Soane is almost better known as an art collector¹ and the home he built for himself is certainly not a typical architect’s house.

Inside, walls are hidden from sight, covered by objects upon objects. Mirrors are placed strategically, multiplying the feeling of a never-ending cabinet of treasures and curiosities. However, architecture is not hidden but enhanced, as the carved-like maze of room



2 „Soane and his contemporaries“, David Watkin. Part of the book „John Soane“ (Academy Editions / St Martin's Press, 1983).



3 In his conferences and classes, Soane often talked about the „poetry of architecture“ as the impressions created by the picturesque effects of his projection.

4 Ricardo Santa Cruz, Teodoro de Anasagasti, José Felipe Giménez Lacal were the official architects commissioned. Modesto Cendoya, then the Conservation Architect of the palaces of Alhambra, has been said to have been consulted at some point, especially in regards to the architecture of the gardens.

5 “Cada punto del espacio de este insólito lugar lleva inscrita una intención de orden emocional o estética. (...) Allí quedarán impresas las claves de su pensamiento estético, de su talento, de sus inquietudes y de sus anhelos.” Miguel Rodríguez-Acosta, nephew of the painter (Translation by the authors).

6 Extracts taken from the video „In Residence: Xavier Corberó“, by Albert Moya for Nowness.

upon room becomes a treatise on how to get natural light inside a building and how to lit a work of art.

No architect without an art collection would have built a house like this; no art collector without the knowledge of an architect could have built a house like this. *“To study Soane is to be faced with the problem of the expression of personality in architecture, for it is surely possible to find in his work reflections of the edginess and vanity, the persecution complex and the unyielding Old Testament morality, the inner conflicts, uncertainties and introspection, which we know were fundamental to his character.”*²

In his search of the “poetry of architecture”³, his house is in essence more aesthetic than it is comfortable. It is a museum more than it is a home.

III

Not one, not two, but three (and maybe even four) architects⁴ were commissioned to build El Carmen Blanco (1916-1928), the house and atelier that José María Rodríguez-Acosta envisioned in the mountains of Granada, just outside the Alhambra palaces. They all contributed in some way, but the result is essentially Rodríguez-Acosta's. *“Every spot in the space of this unusual place registers an intention that is emotional or aesthetic. (...) Imprinted are the keys of his artistic thoughts, of his talent, of his curiosity and of his desires.”*⁵

Rodríguez-Acosta projected this place as if he were painting. It is a delicate balance of masses and voids, construction and nature, modernity and classicism. As in Sir John Soane's Museum, each of its fragments is defined individually, but sums up to the result of its complex totality.

IV

On the opposite side of the spectrum stands casa Malaparte (1937-1939). Its vision upon arriving from land or sea is that of a monolith on a cliff. There is no sum of parts but an absolute whole: a purely shaped piece of architecture that looks like a wrecked ship, a bunker and a temple.

Its hard materiality reminds us of the rock on which it stands, its roof resembles the sea's horizon; but its rotund symmetry is a reminder of its artificiality. It

is not the creation of nature but the creation of a man: of his character and of his life experiences, which become embedded in its formal expression.

As with his writing, the house is surreal and poetic and inflexible. It is not a home, it is a stage for a life, albeit a very particular one.

...

A person looks at pictures of a new structure and marvels at what is, right now, a home:

At the audacity of its natural enclave,
At the scenography of its exteriors,
At the wise use of its materials,
At the bold combination of its elements,
At the proportions of its spaces.

It is an ongoing construction that started on 1968. Its owner is its creator is its user. It is a house made for oneself. Or is it oneself turned into a house?

V

Set in Esplugues de Llobregat, on the outskirts of Barcelona, sculptor Xavier Corberó's house has been generating interest and curiosity for a while. He bought the land almost 50 years ago, and slow but steady, he has been building a home that is not a house, but an intricate labyrinth of modernly interpreted classical shapes bathed in sunlight.

It has the volumetric complexity of Ricardo Bofill's “cities in space” projects from the seventies and the playfulness of the English follies. In spite of this, it is profoundly personal. It has no other purpose but to be the home of his sculptures and a daily inspiration source for him and the artists he has in residence.

It is also the closest we can get to learning the process of one of these houses on real time. These words are all his own⁶, but they seem to define the mind of others:

“I wanted to create, to the extent feasible, a continuum; a place in which the real space is not as important as the mental space.” Corberó or Hadrian?



“I always consider things in themselves. Rooms are considered to remain exactly as they are, and maybe to lodge a sculpture, or some piece of furniture. It possesses utility in itself, not a defining function.” Corberó or Soane?

“What I try to do does not stem from reason. It comes from life itself. I use reason to build things up, so they don’t fall to pieces. But the motives behind all the rest are aesthetic, ethic and, if you will, divine”. Corberó or Rodríguez-Acosta?

“The outcome of what I do has to be poetry, which I believe is the measure of all things” Corberó or Malaparte?

An emperor, an art collector, a painter, a writer and a sculptor. Only one of them was an architect, or were they all?

Laura Bonell and Daniel López-Dòriga (Barcelona, 1987) both studied architecture in ETSAB. They each spent one year studying out, in Accademia di Architettura di Mendrisio and Technische Universität München respectively. They started their office together, Bonell+Dòriga, in 2014, where they work in projects at various scales: from small private commissions to public competitions. Among other places, their work has been published in famed Casabella magazine, as part of their 85th anniversary issue focused on young architects.

The Ordinary in the Problem of Housing

Laura Bonell, Daniel López-Dòriga

THE EVOLUTION OF URBAN ARTIFACTS The Housing Problem

1 These drawings come from on-the-ground surveys done in the last year to complete a series of works regarding property valuation and various kinds of official certificates.

2 As it appears on the "General Theory of Urbanization" (1867) and "la Città Ideale" (1486).

What follows in these few pages is a compilation of 24 floorplans of existing dwellings in apartment buildings in the city of Barcelona.

All of them with the north up, all at the same scale. Neither the name of the architect nor their precise location within the city are included. They are ordered by year of construction and incorporate their built-up area.

They have not been chosen or selected in any way.¹

They cover a period that goes from 1900 to 1992. This is not a conscious choice, but it nevertheless reflects a crucial period in the city, from the Modernist era up to the celebration of the Olympic Games.

We often fixate on exemplary architecture. We study it, we visit it. Books are written about it. It is architecture that serves as a desirable model to follow. In doing this we fail to acknowledge that most buildings that give form to the city are not exemplary.

What is common is necessarily never extraordinary. Even as if sometimes the sum of ordinary parts can create an extraordinary whole.

If the city is largely characterized by collective housing, this collection of drawings offers an objective, though incomplete, portrait of the primary elements that form the city.

Each and every one is defined by its belonging to Barcelona, and each and every one contributes to the

form of Barcelona. This intertwined relationship is a product of time and space; of the geographical, morphological, historical and economic aspects that define the city.

I The city

In its origin, urban fabric can be either spontaneously created or rationally planned.

The city of Barcelona, geographically limited by the sea, the mountains and two rivers, is a dense ensemble of old quarters – highly compacted urban structures characterized by amorphous blocks and narrow streets–, and the more recent expansions built in between and beyond, most notably the enlargement of the old center projected by Ildefons Cerdà.

Cerdà shares with Leonardo the aim to reach an ideal urban planning through the study of science, thus relegating the divine.²

In contraposition with the Gothic quarter, his proposal is based on a low-density non-hierarchical grid with its corners cut off, a 45-degree rotation from the north-south axis and the large size of its blocks, of 113m long per side. It is democratic in its homogeneity and forward thinking in its communication system.

Not unlike the Paris of Haussmann, a project that precedes Cerdà's by only six years, it is a plan that repre-

sents a progressive impulse and an aim to improve the quality of housing and living in the wake of the industrialization of the city.

Cerdà's plan proves to be extremely rational in its organization, but has proven to be partly utopian in its realization, as the built volume nowadays quadruples what was originally intended. The result is a highly densified ensemble, not devoid of its own appeal, but which does not ultimately solve the housing problem by itself.

II The city on the house

The city of Barcelona, whatever the area, is mainly formed by large enclosed blocks with buildings attached one to another. As a consequence of the relatively narrow land division, buildings become very deep, so as to occupy the maximum land possible.

To provide natural light and ventilation to these deep floorplans, small courtyards generally appear and service areas and secondary rooms gather around them. The climate and sun conditions of the city allow for this to function, but it also relates to the dominant catholic morals of introversion, of hiding more than showing off.

Three main dwelling typologies emerge:

[1] Double-oriented apartments, with façades to both the street and the interior courtyard, often characterized by narrow layouts and long corridors.

[2] Apartments with only one façade, either towards the street or to the inner courtyard.

[3] Apartments in corner buildings, with two consecutive façades towards the street.

III The house on the city

The morphology and particular attributes of these apartments have a direct impact on the form of the city.

17 out of the 24 apartments were built between 1954 and 1979, none were built between 1936 and 1953. This is significant, as it directly relates to the history of the city and the country. In 1936 the Spanish Civil War started, which would go on until 1939. The climate of extreme

poverty and uncertainty that followed was a direct cause of the low construction.

Only from 1953 on, with the end of the dictatorship's self-imposed autarchy and the arrival of international funds to the country, the economy started to grow and the shortage of housing was alleviated as construction works intensified. As a result, a great part of the city is defined by the architecture of those decades.

The practical absence of dwellings on the ground floors enables the occupation of these spaces with shops, bars, ateliers or garages; thus creating a decentralized urban fabric of mixed-use activities and lively streets.

The overwhelming presence of balconies adds a flair of customizable domesticity to the image of the city, otherwise defined by rationally structured façades, often load-bearing, with vertically proportioned windows. The balcony is an in-between space, the most public of all the private elements that conform an apartment in the collective housing and the expression of the individual self as part of the city, as seen by the proliferation of protest flags and banners, especially in the last few years.

IV The house

Taken out of their urban context, these drawings represent a miscellany of housing typologies. They epitomize the evolution of the housing typology in the 20th century, or its lack thereof.

Despite the development of radical theories on the architecture of housing, most of them translated into reality at some point or another with various levels of success, we must conclude that in terms of the reality of where people live, this evolution is far from groundbreaking.

The city and its architecture are in constant change, while at the same time they evolve very slowly. Architecture is made to last, but it is at the same time a highly adaptable environment. We may live in one-hundred-year-old homes built in two-thousand-year-old cities, and still live in the present.

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