

Imágenes

01. La imagen autorizada de James Stirling juzgando la edición de 1979 de la Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition, titulada "Una casa para Karl Friedrich Schinkel", pierde cierto sentido cuando se tiene en cuenta que la propia sinopsis del concurso fomentaba las propuestas multiculturales y su aportación a un coloquio más abierto. Créditos: *The Japan Architect*, febrero de 1980, p. 52.

02. Toshikazu Ishida y Diana Juranović lanzan una mirada crítica a la arquitectura contemporánea y al mito de la originalidad con una caja negra donde se recogen sonidos urbanos que, al reproducirse, traen a la mente escenas visuales. Primer premio en la Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition de 1988. Créditos: Toshikazu Ishida y Diana Juranović, *The Japan Architect*, marzo de 1989, p. 11.

03. Azby Brown encuentra el confort urbano en una vivienda improvisada. Tercer premio en la Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition de 1988. Créditos: Azby Brown, *The Japan Architect*, marzo de 1989, p. 15.

04. El dibujo de Jos Roodbol expresa la intuición de que una vivienda confortable en la metrópolis no es más que un sueño efímero. Mención honorífica en la Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition de 1988. Créditos: Jos Roodbol, *The Japan Architect*, marzo de 1989, p. 27.

05. Vinko Penezic y Krešimir Rogina abordaron el tema de la naturaleza para enfatizar que todo está en movimiento aunque aparente ser un sistema infinito y estable. Segundo puesto en la Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition de 1996. Créditos: Vinko Penezic y Krešimir Rogina. *The Japan Architect*, invierno 1996, IV, pp. 228-229.

06. En el mapa urbano de Pornchai Boonsom y Jarrod Broussard, el movimiento y el no movimiento son interdependientes: los edificios de color negro representan puntos de referencia estáticos, mientras que los espacios blancos abiertos indican campos de sistemas dinámicos (izquierda) y viceversa

(derecha). Segundo puesto en la Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition de 1996. Créditos: Pornchai Boonsom y Jarrod Broussard, *The Japan Architect*, invierno 1996, IV, pp. 236-237.

07. Richard Scott, Kirsten Whittle y Jeremy Weate lograron el primer premio en la Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition de 1996 por una serie de fotografías en *time-lapse* con múltiples exposiciones que muestra un "espacio por fases": un entorno que responde directamente a los usuarios. Créditos: Richard Scott, Kirsten Whittle y Jeremy Weate, *The Japan Architect*, invierno 1996, IV, p. 227.

12 Browsing. From Exploration to Navigation, or the Mutation in the (Non-) Project of Architecture Juan Coll-Barreu

The article observes the germ of architectural design, the old "authorship," and confronts the contemporary process in which the hyper-publicized accumulation of resources is used for the incessant reproduction of the built environment. The text shows that the current plurality of the preexisting is radically involved in the production of new "contents" through its interference in the architect's machine. The author of the article analyzes from this perspective two recent architectural projects of respected authorship, to identify an apparent renunciation of the project and authorship in favor of what he calls "browsing" and identifies with the impulsive "scroll down" of navigation on the Internet.



21ST CENTURY, ARCHITECTURE, AND PLURIAUTHORSHIP

The reflection on authorship in architecture has built during the first decades of the century a constellation of approaches to the plurality of agents producing design, the times involved, and the users favored by the actions of architects, or to the role of these as mergers of diverse when not opposed activities, societies, groups, and geographies. Coincidentally, they have been organized around the concept of co-existence, an expression that avoids referring to the production of facts or relationships and postpones in practice the direct observation of the problem of authorship, as if that stage had been provisionally decreed non-existent. Examples of this are the project "Landscapes of Coexistence" presented at Future Architecture in 2018,¹ more tangentially the "Architecture of Coexistence"² conference held in Guadalajara, Mexico, also in 2018 and, in a very revealing way, the work "The Architecture of Coexistence..." through which Stephennie³ Mulder manages to trace the architectural narrative that united none other than Sunnis and Shiites in a conscious building symbiosis during the Middle Ages.

However, that same idea that seems universally assumed has not been transferred to the core aspect of the architecture, to the interior of the project. It is evident the scientific consensus that celebrates the “co-existence” as a monad of contemporary architecture, but not to verify its active presence in the “authorship” of the project, leaves its full validity in abeyance. This text will attempt to observe precisely this germinal process and will verify that the global content and the hyper-publicized accumulation of resources are used also for the incessant reproduction of the built environment (fig. 01). If so, there could be no more radical implication of a preexisting plurality than its “meddling” in the author’s machine.

Four years ago, the knowledge about the evolution of species was completed in a really captivating way, after the studies of Roberto Cazzola Gatti,⁴ empirically confirmed by David A. Marques,⁵ drew a three-dimensional multiplicity of pluriauthorships. In it, the simplistic Darwinian struggle for survival as an explanation of the mechanism of biological advancement is replaced by an accumulation of accommodative relationships or simply by “real sympathy” as an instrument that facilitates not only co-existence, but also the emergence of new species. This turnaround in the theory of evolution seems to possess an irrefutable logic when we observe it in the light of the hyper-connectivity of the second decade of the 21st century and places the idea of production multiplicity based on previous already existing productions nothing less than in the explanation of our own transformative nature.

In this new understanding of the way of producing ourselves and a new way of producing architecture, the spray replaces the line and its ramifications, navigation replaces exploration and, what is probably more significant, the lack of interest –this is understood here as a lack of ascendant, of predominance– replaces the itinerary.

EXPLORATION

“*Recherches*,” “*Searches*,” was the wise plural with which Le Corbusier and Ozenfant titled, in 1924, the article published in number 22 of the magazine *L’Esprit Nouveau* (fig. 02) in which, before reviewing the plastic successes of the

successive personal explorations that would lead to the appearance of Cubism, in which each of them made significant progress on the previous stage, they defined “search” referring to the “fact” sought and the effectiveness of the inquiry, as “the clash, sometimes brutal, of new ideas that bring new facts that upset customs.”⁶ These “new developments,” as they continued, “provide solid resources for the new generations.”⁷ The “novelty” provided the “solidity,” sometimes implanted with “brutality,” and the artist –the painter, the architect– was the discoverer, the explorer of the “new.” “Search” was also the term used by Frank Lloyd Wright, another great explorer in the same decade of the 1920s on the other side of the Atlantic. “I have been searching for the ideal of life and simultaneously searching for the ideal construction”⁸ had proclaimed the Master of the Prairies who, in 1943, resumed his autobiographical writings with an announcement that left no doubt about the permanence of his mission: “the early search for the form continues.”⁹

The coincidental position of the antagonists Le Corbusier and Wright did not differ substantially from that held by the rest of the great architects of the modern avant-garde, as expressed in manifestos, books, and lectures. The “search” was, for them, the succession of discoveries based on a permanent and personal effort that turned the architect into a researcher, an explorer of places that had not existed before, of liberating paths that, mainly, should possess the quality of the uncharted, unexplored.

This imperturbable conviction about research, of exploration as an engine of progress, literally built the twentieth century and has continued in the first two decades of the twenty-first century as an implicit intellectual framework in which the thought about architecture as well as the criticism of architectural works are inscribed.

SCROLLING DOWN

However, the work of an architect today moves away from the exploration of the past millennium and approaches without hesitation browsing, or navigation in the network inherent to the current millennium and even more so after the pandemic (apparent) isolation produced by the covid-19 disease. Now, making architecture is not a search but a browsing on an increasingly extensive sea formed by fully explored, thousand-time sailed and visited territories. The current analogy of the action of design is not the attractive character of the explorer who entered unknown territories that no longer exist, but the convulsive –and, even more than they know– permanent craving of the scroll down.

Let us take two recent examples, unanimously acclaimed by international critics in their still short published lives, and finished by two European architects whose previous careers are not likely to be considered unaffiliated to the exploration of new territories for modernity.

The first is the new Bloomberg headquarters in London, built by Norman Foster in 2017.¹⁰ (fig. 01) It is located a few steps from the iconic explorer 30 Saint Mary Axe, completed by the same architect in 2004, and is a good example of the methodological linearity of his career. Thirteen years later, the new building questions vertical construction as a solution recovered in recent decades for the implementation of corporate headquarters in urban centers, especially in the City of London. It seems to be the first warning about a type of building that the 2020 pandemic and its subsequent global quarantine and adaptation to telecommuting have seriously injured. In exchange for the height, the British central of the giant of communication is organized in irregular prisms of nine apparent floors, made of glass but covered with large pilasters, moldings, cornices, and slats of bronze and limestone, which allow it to relate to the sumptuous classical language of the buildings that surround it and to the bimillennial past of one of the oldest enclaves of the city.

However, the greatest transformation brought about by the Bloomberg building alluded to the linearity of Foster’s inventive discourse, which we exemplified in the geographically close “The Gherkin,” is not its design decisions but precisely the way in which these are found and applied. The chain of explorations of the previous eras gives way now to a simultaneous and brilliant selection and application of images, strategies, and meanings. The Foster navigator replaces the Foster discoverer. The dispersion of the program in volumes, the stone plane on which they stand, and the elegant orthogonality of its facades, chamfers included, are the urban approaches of the Economist complex built in 1964 by Alison and Peter Smithson in the same (figs. 03, 04) city of London. The bronze that surrounds the building and its materialistic insistence was even closer, in the prism made of the same material that Mies van der Rohe designed in 1967 and never executed almost on the same site, across from Queen Victoria Street.¹¹ The curved and intertwined walkways of the interior were born in the penguin pool of London Zoo built by Berthold Lubetkin (figs. 05, 06) in 1934. The architect also navigates his own work, and the 1975 building of Willis, Faber and Dumas in Ipswich provides the urban compactness and low height of a corporate building where the offices are added to recreational and restful uses, are crossed by a pedestrian axis, and have an upward dynamic and a floorplan of very similar proportions.

The second example is of a much more modest scale, but it would also seem a foretaste of new post-pandemic ideals, in this case contact with nature, life confined outside the city, and the hyper-technification of that isolation. Peter Zumthor’s Villa in Devon¹² is his first permanent work in the UK and is made up of a cluster of concrete and glass pieces (fig. 07) open to the contemplation of the undulating, humid and warm landscape of the South of England.¹³

The commission completed in 2018 by the Swiss architect has browsed (both in its finished form and in its models and working documents) by the (fig. 08) Prehistoric dolmens –reused later, among others, by Superflex in “Dive-In,” its pink installation in Coachella globalized desert–; Le Corbusier’s necessarily handcrafted concretes in Chandigarh as still observed in the columns of the Secretariat building; also by Mies van der Rohe, this time in his House 50 by 50 –of 1950, as it should be in the master of perfection– whose square glass plan with four accesses located in swastika, occupied as a continuous space thanks to the arrangement of exempt interior parts, is exactly (figs. 09, 10) the house in Devon; or, as in the example by Foster, by the architect’s own work, also revisited here, where the façade to the landscape of the Baths in Vals scales with millimeter fidelity to transform itself into the elevations of the bedrooms (figs. 11, 12) of his English house.

There is an archaic precedent, that is, prior to the time of social networks, of this multi-referent system to make architecture. We can find it in the grouping of times and places lived by Marna and Rockwell Schnabel with which Frank O. Gehry composed in 1990 the couple’s house in Brentwood, Los Angeles. The architect invited the clients to remember “significant things, ideas that you liked, places that you liked, scraps or pieces of your life that you would like to remember”¹⁴ to compose the architectural collage of the house, although there each category alluded to was performed by a different piece, and the calls were not yet intermingled to configure the architecture.

The allusions and references listed about the pieces in London and Devon are not intended to be a comprehensive inventory. It would not make sense for it to be so in a work of this extension, nor would it be consistent with the reality explained. It will be possible to correct them and make valuable additions, and it will also be possible to include a multitude of current architectural works resulting from many other navigations. Families of related projects can also be tracked by the sources of their particular logbooks, which feedback on currents that cross the World Wide Web sites most admired by our profession.

BROWSE, SIGHT, AND USE

The mechanism is not that of a “civilization,” as Michel Houellebecq would say, which “dies of tiredness.”¹⁵ The navigators belong to a decadent period, yes –which, by itself, makes them already a coveted object– but more significant is the fact that they are pioneers of an era that is making its way. That is to say, they have not lost the production capacity –the “originality” if we were to use the popularly accepted term– but have given up the project understood with the old meaning of exploration, still commonly used in most schools of architecture in the world.

No one would predict much success for a profession of explorers in a world already as overexplored and hypertransited as ours –which even, by the very existence of those incessant and crushingly repeated transits, has had during the pandemic to temporarily stop all its movements in an unprecedented tacit agreement.

In contrast, we are faced with the logical use of a knowledge that seems to have no end, which is still growing at a speed that is almost impossible to calculate and whose consideration forces a different way of working and, also, of producing architecture, a new “speciation.” It would identify itself as a phenomenon derived from the digital revolution, even in the sense that Paul Mason gives to his “post-capitalism,” according to which the availability of knowledge at low prices opens the door, by the difficulty of its dosage, to an era of “sharing” and the consequent “contradiction” in the previously established power.¹⁶ “Sharing” turns the whole of the growing volume of architectural pieces into an endless working capital of cumulative use, while architects accustomed to the old “search” face a systemic “contradiction.”

It is enlightening to analyze the evolution of the terms –I wish metadata were used more in architecture theory– “exploration” and “browsing” published over the last few decades. While the first grows almost parabolically and reaches its peak in 1980, when it multiplies by 17 the appearances of the second, this later one goes up at that moment and begins to gain the position that the other loses during the end of the twentieth century;¹⁷ aimless navigation takes over, as “nets” do on “hierarchies” in Mason’s theory.

The project, like the architecture, has mutated in response to the explosion of connectivity, the profusion of information, and the apparent exhaustion of ideas. This mutated projective exercise has almost identical characteristics, as we have seen, in works that we can well describe as opposite in terms of scale, location, purpose, and type of client, and in offices also opposed by their link with the outside, that is, by their radical difference in relation to the current forces of production, openly direct one of them, veiled by a symbolic network the other.

This reversal of the design work once again demonstrates that the use of data is the technology that truly transforms the discipline, as opposed to the limited advances of its own physicality. To this new technology, architecture has been adhered in an automatic way. It did not need to meditate on it as the masters of the last century did and we have glossed at the beginning, nor to establish it in a renewed *Charte d’Athènes* or by no way to decide it in turbulent international conferences such as the recurrent CIAM. It has occurred directly, pushed into an abyss of connections by the unstoppable journey of networked knowledge.

Architecture does not seek anymore. It directly finds, selects, and applies. Moreover, if navigation through the existing means the absence of the project, it is exactly there where it finds its advantage to interpret and develop our moment, in which, in the words of Éric Vuillard, “the absence of the project is the contemporary, possible and necessary form of freedom.”¹⁸ Vuillard did not talk about architecture, but undoubtedly, he could have done so, not only because production often precedes social uses, but because of the congruence of the “code blocks” he identifies. Freedom is only possible without a project, it needs to be so, and it is our way of achieving it.

Indeed, navigation heralds a horizon of freedom and possibilities, infinitely and constantly growing. The architecture of browsing does not produce, therefore, mortgaged returns but free, sensitive, and bold –let us borrow Le Corbusier’s term as consistent digital navigators– “facts”: the disinterested –remember, exempt from the predominance– outcome of browsing, sighting, and using.

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Acknowledgments

This translation into English was made possible thanks to the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid UPM.

Notes

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Images

01. Foster + Partners, Bloomberg headquarters, London, 2017. Exterior overview of the confluence of Queen Victoria St. and Cannon St. Photo by James Newton.

02. Amédée Ozenfant and Le Corbusier, first page of the article "Recherches" in number 22 of *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, 1924.

03. Foster + Partners, Bloomberg headquarters, London, 2017. One of the accesses from Queen Victoria St. Photo Nigel Young / Foster + Partners.

04. Alison and Peter Smithson, Economist building complex, London, 1964. Photo by Michael Carapetian.

05. Foster + Partners, Bloomberg headquarters, London, 2017. Interior ramp. Photo by Nigel Young / Foster + Partners.

06. Berthold Lubetkin, penguin pool at London Zoo, 1934.

07. Peter Zumthor, Villa in Devon, 2018. Plant of the built version.

08. Peter Zumthor, Villa in Devon, 2018. Living room under construction.

09. Peter Zumthor, Villa in Devon, 2018. Photo by Jack Hobhouse.

10. Mies van der Rohe, House 50 x 50 feet, model, 1950.

11. Peter Zumthor, Villa in Devon, 2018. Bedroom wing under construction.

12. Peter Zumthor, Baths in Waltz, 1996. Photo Nick Kane.