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NOSOTROS TAMBIÉN TENEMOS ARMAS

Rubén Alcolea

Subdirector, Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura,
Universidad de Navarra

Jorge Tárrago

Director de Estudios, Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura,
Universidad de Navarra

Como red entre el deconstructivismo aparecido a
fines del s. XX y la arquitectura de la marginalidad,
el vínculo entre diseño, improvisación,
transferencia tecnológica y reciclaje puede
entregar algunas claves para una arquitectura de
emergencia.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Arquitectura – Teoría y crítica, deconstructivismo,
ready-made, improvisación

IMPROVISACIÓN Y ARQUITECTURA

En ocasiones solo cabe plantearse la improvisación como la única alternativa capaz de articular por completo el discurso creativo. Como demuestra la casa de Frank Gehry en Santa Mónica, no se trata necesariamente de procesos arbitrarios o banales, sino del resultado de una reflexión continua y paciente que permite una lectura alternativa del concepto genio.

"Si venís a la mía os recibiré a tiro limpio; nosotros también tenemos armas". Con esa espontaneidad recibió José, líder de uno de los clanes locales, a los agentes de policía que iniciaron el desalojo y demolición de las infraviviendas del poblado de El Cañaveral en el distrito madrileño de Vicálvaro, mejor conocido como La Jungla, a fines del mes de septiembre de 2007. Pese a que se temía lo peor, las excavadoras continuaron su trabajo escoltadas y la jornada terminó con muy pocos altercados: solo manotazos y balines de goma.

Según el censo de ese año¹, en el extrarradio de Madrid habitaban cerca de 1.084 familias en 1.325 chabolas² distribuidas en distintos asentamientos de emergencia social. Ellas compartían espacio con las viviendas prefabricadas legales y contaban con contratos de alquiler mensual gestionados por la Empresa Municipal de la Vivienda EMV. La Jungla de Vicálvaro se creó en 1988 como campamento de realojo de un centenar de familias que, a su vez, provenían del desmantelamiento de otro poblado similar denominado Los Focos. Además de los habituales módulos prefabricados, el poblado también contaba con casas de infestibación y una gran cantidad de viviendas ilegales.

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1 Censo realizado por el Instituto de Estadística e Integración Social IRIS.

2 Viviendas pequeñas y de construcción precaria que suelen emplazarse en zonas del Ed.).

3 El desalojo de El Cañaveral estableció un precedente dentro de una operación municipal.



Chabola en El Cañaveral, La Jungla, Vicálvaro, Madrid,
1988.
Fotografía de Coper Theo Balles

El Cañaveral shanty town, La Jungla, Vicálvaro,
Madrid, 1988.
Photo by Coper Theo Balles



Prefacio del catálogo *Deconstructivist Architecture* con la imagen del rodamiento de bolas portada de *Machine Art* (1934) y la fotografía del cobertizo en el desierto de Nevada de Michael Heizer.
Archivo de los autores

Deconstructivist Architecture catalogue: image of ball bearings used as the cover of the *Machine Art* (1934) and Michael Heizer's photo depicting a shed in the Nevada desert
Author's archive



Casa Gehry, Santa Mónica, California. 1978-88.
 Archivo de los autores



- 8 Apenas acabada la primera intervención, la casa en Santa Mónica comenzó a recibir atención por parte de las publicaciones especializadas. La japonesa *GA Houses* N°6 fue una de las primeras revistas en dar a conocer la obra en el extranjero en octubre de 1979.
- 9 Fase célebre del conde de Buffon, Georges-Louis Leclerc (1707-1788).
- 10 Conocidos también como *found art* o *ready made* (N. del Ed.).
- 11 Obviamente la casa continúa la larga tradición californiana de promoción de la prefabricación y uso de materiales industrializados, perfectamente ejemplificado en el celebrado programa *Case Study Houses* de la década de 1950. Para conocerlo sugerimos consultar el libro de Elizabeth Smith, *Case Study Houses: the complete CSH program 1945-1966* (Taschen, 2002).

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facto no diseñado y el recurso de operaciones próximas al reciclaje o a la destrucción. Este tipo de arquitectura, que induce a una lectura paralela que comparte estrategias con Claes Oldenbourg, aunque relegada a menudo a un desdibujado segundo plano, pretende escapar a la categorización y su provisión a una categoría estética (Smith, 1997). No es banal que una obra que ha sido tan discutida en las que aparecía publicada el propio Gehry hablaba de esta obra como "mi casa y una composición abierta".⁸

Composición abierta o improvisación son términos que evocan, casi inmediatamente, a otras improvisaciones míticas generadas bajo la influencia de la costumbre. Un ejemplo la que llevó a cabo John Cage por aquellos mismos años, no muy lejos del mundo de Bertiz de Heizer. En aquella ocasión, durante la gira con la Cunningham Company en 1975, uno de los bailarines se acercó a John Cage con un cactus seco. Esos años, cuando su oído y punteó sus espinas haciéndolas sonar como si se tratara de las de un piano. Este suceso dio lugar al nacimiento de esta nueva sonoridad fue después muy utilizada por el compositor como *Child of Tree* (1975) o *Branches* (1976), además de consolidar la improvisación que utilizaba la improvisación como disciplina artística mediante objetos cotidianos convertidos en instrumentos.

Es obvio que la improvisación ha sido tradicionalmente un fenómeno con una fuerte connotación despectiva –sobre todo en el contexto occidental– pero que con la llegada de la posmodernidad ha sabido otorgarle una nueva oportunidad, lo que ha permitido que nuevos parámetros como la arbitrariedad, se integre en el proceso creativo. La improvisación artística. Tampoco es la lógica improvisadora –si cabe definirla así– un fenómeno reciente, pues acompaña a menudo a artistas de profunda formación intelectual. Desde un punto de vista etimológico, improvisar es “hacer algo de pronto, sin estudio ni preparación”. Sin embargo, ello debe negar necesariamente la formación previa, como anticipaba el filósofo francés de la cotot en su *Ensayo filosófico sobre la improvisación* (1846), al alegar que “la improvisación es, en efecto, un talento adquirido, ¿quién puede en efecto ver el genio?”.

No es, en efecto, algo banal. En ocasiones, y especialmente en situaciones de exclusión social, cabe plantearse la improvisación como la única vía de escape particular por completo el discurso creativo, cuyo material de trabajo alcanza a ser residual. Es entonces cuando el genio, mediante su “gran disposición a la improvisación” (1846) y el continuo ejercicio de componer, fruto del estudio reflexivo de la improvisación, hace fructificar el trabajo más que convertirse en una ostentación de regímenes arbitrarios (Capmany, c. 1820).

La casa de Gehry, en sí misma, pone de manifiesto tanto ese ejercicio creativo como el de libertad creativa extrema, pues reinventa lo existente y propone una interesante inversión lingüística, asemeja la obra a uno de aquellos *objets trouvés* que los genios descolocaron a intelectuales y profanos. Por otro lado, la historia de esta casa es conocida. La primera intervención a esta vivienda que Gehry transformaría comenzó en 1978 cuando el arquitecto pretendía reconvertir, con los mínimos recursos, la que había comprado Berta, su segunda mujer. Sin embargo, y desde entonces, se han dado continuas transformaciones –no todas ellas dignas de alabanza–. De hecho, es difícil reconocer algunas de las cualidades que la hicieron especial cuando fue construida.

Aquel joven Gehry, despreocupado por el concepto de marca o *branding*, se integró en la escena global, transformó de manera artesanal una casita de extrarradio en un espacio de la ciudad. Los procesos arquitectónicos rayaron entonces la auto-construcción, lo que le permitió compartir con sus vecinos, que quizás no querían que su barrio fuera convertido en un espacio tónicamente degradada. La respuesta de Gehry a las quejas fue: “¿Y qué voy a hacer? ¿Guardan en el patio trasero? ¿Y del remolque? Se trata del mismo material que se usa para hacer la casa” (Cohn, 1990). Pero los argumentos del arquitecto no convencieron a sus vecinos, quienes se indignaron hasta tal punto por la apariencia de la nueva vivienda que, una noche, se juntaron frente a la casa para tirotearla.

WE HAVE WEAPONS TOO

Rubén Alcolea

Sub-director, Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura,
Universidad de Navarra

Jorge Tárrago

Director of Studies, Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura,
Universidad de Navarra

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.

KEYWORDS Architecture – Theory and criticism, deconstructivism, ready-made, improvisation

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 Cañaveral 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 E.M.V. 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

positions of rectangular and trapezoidal forms of Rodchenko, Coop Himmel(b)lau; with the points, lines and planes of Malevich or the more obvious axonometric of Koolhaas, to give some examples. According to the curators, while some proposals were to be precarious and experimental, the others were developed to be built; some, according to Phillip Johnson and his "theorist eye" are pure images of the old International Style and 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 *Art* exhibition of 1934, and with a photograph by Michael Sroog that depicted an old, rundown shed built in the 1860's that sprung on his land in the Nevada desert. With the image Johnson alluded, not without irony, to an architecture designed arbitrarily and without aesthetic ends or pedigree and to a certain point, improvised. Johnson, himself, also invoked another celebrated exposition by Bernard Rudofsky, *Architecture without walls* in which the architecture itself was developed from the chaotic architectural processes of the strictest sense (Rudofsky, 1967).

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 exhibition (directed not only to an elite public), it may be enough to see the will of the curators to bring out the rebel stamp of the objects shown in search of an apparent instability, that gives a sensation of collapse. Wigley said it perfectly in the first line of his essay accompanying the catalogue: "Architecture has always been a central cultural institution that has valued order and control over everything. These qualities are understood as a product of geometric purity of formal composition [...] The projects in this exposition trace a different sensibility, one in which the stability of the pure form has been disturbed. The form has been deconstructed. The dream has been transformed to a kind of nightmare" (Johnson, 1988).

If Wigley articulated the deconstructionist argument, Johnson, that old modernist armed with a vision free from rhetorical compromises –and thusly maybe more accurate– was not, and it was then, that Heizer's photo connected unexpectedly but evidently with a particular project showcased, maybe the final one: the Santa Monica house built between 1978 and 1981 by a young Frank Gehry. In effect, as the curators assured, the 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 exercised 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 in the seventies marks his potential for integrating mass-produced objects. He uses them at the same time not only in the capacity of supporting a traditional aesthetic but setting a new distance from them, giving them a different use to the expected. It would be even possible to say that this new position was far from conventional decency. That Gehry worked with low-cost and industrial materials; his highlighted interest in recycling and transfer of technology

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.

their neighbors, that maybe didn't want to be transformed into an area architecturally different. To the complaints of his neighbors was: “A house is not a boat. To say about the boat parked in your driveway: Is it the motor home? It is the same material as the house” (Cohn, 1990).

However, the arguments of the architect against his neighbors, who were so enraged by the house that one night, in wild-west fashion, went to the front of the house to gun it down. **ARQ**

- 1 Census realized by the *Instituto de Realojamiento e Integración*.
- 2 In Spain, shanty towns (Translator's note).
- 3 The relocation of El Cañaveral was included in an ambitious plan which consisted in dismantling all the populated slums of the inhabitants in official social housing before 2011. See “El Cañaveral”, newspaper *El Mundo*, September 25, 2007 and “the Madrid plan to do away with the slums”, newspaper *El País*.
- 4 The exhibited projects were: Rooftop Remodeling – Vienna, 1986 – y Skyline – Hamburg, 1985 – by Coop Himmelstempel of Frankfurt – Frankfurt am Main, 1987 – by Peter Eisenman – 1978-1988 – and Familian House – Santa Monica, 1978 – Kong, 1982 – by Zaha Hadid; Building and Tower – Rotterdam, 1987 – by Daniel Libeskind; and Parc de La Defense – Bernard Tschumi.
- 5 We send the reader to the bibliography, where we provide the references. Especially interesting is the chapter of the book where the discussion of Frank Gehry's Santa Monica house are presented.
- 6 The astonished commentary by the neighbors produced by the house appeared to be compiled by the architect himself in the *Quarterly magazine* N° 138, p. 2-11.
- 7 The author links these materials to *poor-tech* instead of *low-tech*.
- 8 The first intervention was barely finished when the Santa Monica house attracted attention from specialized publications. The Japanese *GA* magazines to recognize the foreign work in October 1979.
- 9 Count of Buffon, Georges-Louis Leclerc (1707-1788) famous for his *Essai de métaphysique*.
- 10 The Spanish original uses the French *objets trouvés* (Translation).
- 11 Obviously the house continues the long Californian tradition of the use of industrialized materials, perfectly exemplified in the Houses of the 1950's. To see them, consulte the book by the author: *the complete CSH program 1945-1966* (Taschen, 2002).

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