

25 GALICIAN HOUSES 1994-2004. Urban sprawl architectures

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... A people is in a state of insomnia when the sum total of its dreams has diminished considerably.
Ismail Kadaré, "The Palace of Dreams"

Introduction.

From the second half of the 20th century onwards, we have lived an intense and accelerated process of urbanization on a global scale. It has spread to large areas of land between cities and regions, extending urban models to rural land, propagating urban values, behaviour patterns and production systems throughout the territory.

At the start of the 21st century land is still used in an extensive way, as the importance of distances decreases and regions tend to become more global places than local ones. Among other consequences, this phenomenon brings about an increase in people's mobility which results in the disappearance of the limits between the urban and rural condition, as well as a rise of suburbanization and urban pressure on the land.

It could be said that more and more territory is being developed at an ever increasing pace by means of a fragmentary, diffuse mode of occupation. Towns and cities play a primary role in this process, providing the tertiary sector activities where services and facilities not found across the territory are concentrated. More pressure is put on non urban land by residential functions and other facilities requiring large amounts of space not available in urban areas.

These new territories of urban diffusion are full of dispersed urban activities, with no formal or functional structure. They are sometimes referred to as non-spaces, where the city is no longer present to provide a framework and where nature and the landscape have lost their identities to a great extent. We live in many such places, where new dwellings are being built and new generations of citizens are growing up.

Technological and economic progress is translating urban functions and activities, which no longer can be developed in towns, to rural land and, in order to satisfy the demands, adopting diffuse urbanization as its territorial model. In economic terms, the cost of this kind of urban expansion is very high. Such low density construction disrupts territorial equilibrium; it is just consumption of space which reduces agricultural and wooded land, gives rise to "artificial" natural areas and new land uses which are not integrated and erode the former territorial stability.

To a greater or lesser extent, the phenomenon of urban diffusion, which can be defined as the extension of urbanization and specialization to the rural medium, is repeated as if it were the "landscape" of the heralded global economy, be it in peripheral areas which have a less established practice of territorial planning such as Galicia, or other areas that do. Our future development, the stability of the environment and the habitability of our towns and cities depend on our understanding and management of this social phenomenon.

Little or nothing is told of how and when this process began, of who is responsible for it, of what its consequences in the future may be and whether it is the best option to make a place habitable. We do not demand to know and when the future is mentioned there is no concern for the territorial model and its management is not queried.

The house is one of the architectural types which go to make up the territory. It is without doubt the most important of all, however it is only referred to in economic terms. Nowadays the house is measured by its floor area and not by its quality; we ask how much it will cost and how we are going to pay for it. Sometimes it seems that we do not realize that it is the place where we live our lives, one of the places where we are able to attain maximum intimacy. Rarely do we ponder over possible better ways of living, whether our houses could be improved and even be made cheaper, better adapted to our lifestyles, our interests, whether living in a different way would lead to more comfort and how this would influence our health. There are speculations

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about the house of the future full of domotics - the intelligent dwelling - but not of people searching for an intelligent way to live better. Can our houses be made better?

A temporary document

This book contains 25 houses built in Galicia in areas of urban sprawl in the last ten years, between 1994 and 2004, but the idea was to try to make the book a temporary document, a snapshot of a particular moment of our history. A snapshot of the transformation of our territory and its forms of habitation, of the places where construction is taking place today and the way we inhabit those places in order that Galicians can know themselves better and can add their contribution to the contemporary study of diverse typologies constituting the built environment of today.

The aim of this book is to show what is happening to the single-family dwelling in Galicia and to be an instrument that allows us to question how and why transformations are taking place. Thus this book is also a catalogue for a travelling exhibition which collects different points of view about the region and the contemporary house as constructed in Galicia. The photographic, the architectural and the urban planning points of view are presented together with three lines of research summarized in the three articles following this introduction. The first article by myself, discusses the urbanization process of the region and territories of urban diffusion, the context for the 25 selected houses and for the greater part of Galician construction today. The second article by Plácido Lizancos reflects on the evolution and transformation of folk architecture housing in contemporary Galicia. The third article by Fernando Agrasar is an aesthetic and compositional analysis of the contemporary Galician house, which relates the 25 selected houses to their context and heritage.

Both the book and the exhibition are called "25 Galician Houses 1994-2004. Urban Sprawl architectures" with the objective of making the reader and the visitor think about what is happening in Galicia today, how the territory is being transformed, what the new modes of living are and the places where all this is taking place. The theme comprises how Galicians live and what their houses are like, how they could live better and which examples are exceptional within the multitude of buildings that are around us.

I've had the pleasure of visiting many houses, some several times. I phoned and e-mailed friends all over Galicia to whom I am most grateful in aiding me in finding the houses and their residents. I covered many kilometers by car and shall continue to do so, searching for new houses and visiting those that are still under construction. I am doing this because my wish is for this project to continue beyond this book and this exhibition, in order to discover new buildings that offer alternatives and new models of habitation within the contemporary complexity of the Galician territory. There is also the desire to create the healthy habit of discussing our houses not as marketable products but as places to be lived in and enjoyed. I have had to leave some houses out and I'm sure that many readers would have made a totally different selection but I have chosen the 25 houses for their variety, their spatial qualities, the way they interact with their surroundings and the manner in which their residents live.

This book and this exhibition are intended for people that are unfamiliar with studying architecture and I know that their forms, their structures and some of the building materials and finishes applied will be surprising. However, I hope that the visitor will have the patience to put aside the differences and search for the humanity and the habitability of their spaces, obtained at the same cost or less than a flat in a suburban block of flats or many of the ostentatiously oversized single family houses built along our roadsides.

A photographic project

For this project I was lucky enough to be able to count on the assistance of the photographer Pablo Anllo. I very much appreciate his efforts and professionalism because very often I was searching for more content than an image could provide and he always had the patience to listen and attain a fine architectural portrait.

We wanted the 25 houses portrayed here to be photographed at the same time of year, namely the winter of 2003. However this winter was not typical of Galicia. It did not rain so much, the skies were not as cloudy and grey as usual which deprived us of a climatic component we both wished to use. Galicia is an Atlantic land marked by water, clouds and rain and when our buildings appear portrayed in other publications they seem to be located on the Mediterranean coast. It is a pity we have only been partially able to change this tendency.

We attempted to use photography as a means to explain the relationship between the house and its surroundings and the way the spaces of the houses are lived in. We did not set out to portray objects but to show inhabited spaces and each house in its context whatever the contrast between the two. The intention was to make a social document, a portrait of life in every house from dawn till dusk, an everyday image of architecture being used. Some of these original aims have been achieved. With difficulty some photographs, that could be described as landscape views, have been made, where the landscape is more important than the subject and that serve as images of urban sprawl landscapes. It was even harder to avoid making conventional photographs of interiors. Photographing the residents during the day was seldom possible, because to our surprise they spent most of their time away from home, leaving early in the morning and returning late at night. For this reason some houses were photographed on Saturday or Sunday. The occupations of the residents were homogenous: self-employed professionals, civil servants, university graduates, with very different incomes, which were not a decisive factor when it came to building a comfortable house adapted to their lifestyle. Thus this project is also an unintentional portrait of a generation constituting a social group that builds made-to-measure homes for themselves in well communicated spots, close to the towns and cities where they work.

An urban planning project

Never before in the history of Galicia has so much building activity taken place so intensely and in such a widespread manner. As in the rest of the world this is one of the most important things bequeathed to us by the 20th century: the extension of urban processes to vast areas of our territory.

As we have said these areas where Galicia is growing the most are full of dispersed urban activities with no structure. This is a situation found all over the whole world in many forms and subject to many varying factors which is not the simple result of the urban growth. It is rather the consequence of the disappearance of the concepts of town and countryside inherited from previous centuries. Nowadays it is hard to define the border between town and country but in any case it is necessary to understand urbanization processes.

This book contains houses built in the last ten years at the turn of the century, all examples of urban sprawl. They are examples of new modes of living derived from contemporary forces acting on the territory and are part of the newly emerging urbanized landscape. By studying and exhibiting these houses we can obtain a representation of the contemporary Galician landscape. As exceptional architectural concepts responding to a specific site and client's brief they provide an awareness of how our territory is being utilized.

An architectural project

The long title of this book has been chosen neither as an attempt to unify the varied proposals for providing housing in Galicia in recent years nor the possibility they open up for the future. It is rather to initiate a reflection on the relationship between the houses and the territory and also what I believe to be a specific Galician association of house and landscape that allows us to explain and understand them as a group.

When we began this project what we did not want to do was make mere portraits of the houses, nor their occupants, nor the diffuse territory in which they are located. The selection does not represent a summary of diverse housing proposals in Galicia nor is it a guide to Galician architects and contractors. This is a didactic project, not an encyclopedic one. The houses selected help to explain an instant and part of our immediate reality, perhaps the most complex and universal one, our dwellings, our citizens, our landscape.

The majority of the houses are new-build, detached, single-family homes, but there are also renovation projects, terrace houses, lofts, and in fact, any scheme that departs from the ubiquitous block of flats and proposes new spaces for diverse activities and social structures.

The houses are located all over Galicia with the initial aim of presenting as many disparate examples from different places. However it was difficult to find examples of new architecture in the provinces of Lugo and Ourense and so the most represented areas are inevitably close to the large towns of A Coruña, Vigo and Santiago de Compostela. They are part of a rapidly changing Galicia, full of contradictions, where what Plácido Lizancos has called "popular" dwellings are found in greater numbers, but sometimes next to a minority house, also called "designer" houses by some the 25 examples found in this book.

Each house has been built by a team of technicians and builders whose names and addresses appear after every project. This crediting began as an act of recognition for the effort of all taking part, but by highlighting the distances involved, also serves to show the great mobility of all those who intervened.

Each house has been designed and built by an architect. It was the architect who led us to each house and accompanied us on the first visit. The architect's relationship with the client was in all cases very close, he or she being considered after a time one of the family. Thus it is not difficult to observe how the habits of the occupants of the houses respond to their design and construction.

A diffuse generation

As I visited house after house and drew up the shortlist I encountered many architects with interesting and unknown projects. The selected projects do not intend to catalogue a particular generation of architects; the emphasis was on the house itself in each case, not on the age or origins of the designer. However, without meaning to, I came across a majority of professionals of around forty years of age, graduates of the Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura of A Coruña, who paradoxically were ignorant of the work of their peers.

This led me to define them as a DIFFUSE GENERATION, they intervene in the landscape of urban diffusion, their places of work are as diffuse as their relationships. Their architecture has similar goals but they all work in their own office without formally recognizing each other as neighbours, despite sharing the same geographical space. Their influences and references are diverse and they do not exist as a group. However what does characterize them all is the way they respond to the territory and its legacies, there is a commitment to the adaptation of their architecture to the landscape observable in the way they intervene using the existing forms of access, divisions into smallholdings and settlements inherited from a vernacular agrarian tradition.

Summing up, this book and accompanying exhibition presenting their designs and working models are a portrayal of 25 houses built by 25 architects and builders. They serve to understand new ways to inhabit the territory and as a guide for those seeking a house that responds to their needs and resources, different to those offered by the real estate market with all their defects and excesses.

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