

Changer de perspectives

L'analyse et l'enseignement de l'architecture ne peuvent faire l'économie de ses dimensions historiques, sociologiques et politiques. La déconstruction des discours supposés neutres passe par des points de vue critiques, en particulier féministes. Entretien.

Methods

What references and sources do you use to read and analyze architecture and the city? You have mentioned the “genealogy method.” How does it apply to architecture? Can you give us an example?

We don't consider architecture to be an independent field. We think of it as linked with many aspects beyond its strict disciplinary limits and as more than a technical matter. From our perspective, the most interesting way to understand architecture is in relation to its specific social and political context, as well as time and place.

Architecture is not an autonomous field. Architects draw upon knowledge from other fields that can help us explain and understand architecture itself. In this sense, it is also important not to dismiss other kinds of knowledge, such as the lived experience of the inhabitants or users of buildings.

We consider the rethinking of the past from a contemporary perspective to be essential to understanding our present. We use the genealogical method, based on historical data and material, to address important questions about our own time, to recognize the organization of processes, and to analyze the fields of power—in every case. We also introduce post-occupancy analysis. Not only are architectural projects significant, but also the situation that precedes the realization of the architectural project and its aftermath and inhabitation.

Our point of departure is to make visible examples from the past in which architects have used their knowledge to create better conditions for human life. In some cases, taking into account the “traditional” architect, that means considering the process of design and the act of building; in other cases, it means considering the architect as a politician, sociologist, or thinker. Our arguments are built on a variety of different kinds of knowledge (feminist theory, post structuralism, radical urban sociology, philosophy, and political theory), never forgetting “reality,” i.e., what is happening out there.

We believe that there is no such thing as a neutral practice, and we recognize that our vision and practice depend on our respective political and philosophical positions. We assert the need to clarify the position and place from which we are acting, the point of enunciation, which is not the same for the neoliberal, the neo-Marxist, the ecological, or the feminist position.

Revisiting history

As an architect, your commitment to alternative spaces is first reflected by a return to the history of architecture. What kind of rewritings do you suggest? (Here, we are referring to the various articles in your book *Arquitectura y Política* and the research group *un día/una arquitecta*). What other decentering operations do you propose (geographical, sociocultural)?

I've proposed that we must reinterpret our heritage-history of architecture in order to deconstruct the heroic discourse, that is, to recognize *other* contributions. The first task is to change the center of gravity, the focus on Europe and North America, enlarging the lens and reading everything again, primary and secondary sources. In doing so, we seek to inscribe architectural works

in time and space (social, cultural, economic, and political contexts) and acknowledge that any architectural product is the result of a deeper, integrated process, in which a variety of people and circumstances intervene. But for me, the starting point would be to bring more visibility to women: to employ a new or different lens through which to look at our past by studying their, our participation in all human activities.

We need to assume a critical stance on the supposedly “neutral” history that recognizes the singular male, white and powerful, as an only and individual maker. The various artifacts that humanity has created throughout history are too complex to have been made by a single set of individuals. We need to reveal the complexity and the contributions of others, and for that, it is necessary to re-read our past, and to incorporate experience drawn from daily life. If we realize that men and women collaborate today, why would we not think this was not so in the past?

In order to draw attention to forgotten architects, we founded the international research group *un día/una arquitecta*. Voir <https://undiaunaarquitecta.wordpress.com/>

The aim of the group is to unveil the participation of women in architecture. On March 8, 2015, we began to publish on our blog the biography of a woman architect each day, beginning with women architects from the seventeenth century and continuing up to the present time. So far, the website has received more than 340,000 visits from around the world.

Heteronomy/Autonomy of architecture

How do these heteronomous representations of architecture operate? How does such knowledge “about architecture” become knowledge “for” architecture? The histories you have (re)written have their autonomy, but you also articulate them as actions. What lessons do these new readings of history teach you?

We’ve proposed to build a new interpretation based on history in order to better understand our present. There can be a degree of autonomy in the conception of architecture, but as long as it is a response to a singular reality, it cannot be autonomous. In order for architecture to function (on a mechanical level, in terms of uses, but also on an aesthetic level), it must be related to the social, cultural, and economic contexts. If not, it is reduced to a question of composition. For us these “histories” are the basis for understanding the processes that give birth to one or another example of architecture or urbanism. With that in mind, we are able to read complexity, and after that, to analyze and to understand the spatial relations of an architectural work. Those are the bases of our book *Arquitectura y política*, in which we raised questions about our society and the inhabitants of contemporary architecture and cities, and where we presented architects’ positions on the design of public spaces and housing. In a manipulated world, if it is legitimate to accept any project, it is necessary to reveal and to regard in a new way our past as architects in order to imagine an ethics of the profession for our time.

Operational activities

What are your fields of action now? How do you engage your students in building these alternative worlds?

Our fields of action are linked with the political transformation of Spanish cities. Cities are where the democratic transformation of our future—an inclusive and democratic one—begins, since municipal government is most directly involved in the daily life of citizens, their dreams and their needs. To engage students, I believe that the first priority is to make clear that architectural knowledge and thinking are essential. (The crisis in Spain portrayed architects as part of the problem, and also communicated the notion that there is no work for us. We need to change this perception and to raise awareness about the value of the profession). Architects are necessary to improving the living conditions of our society, but we are not alone in this. We must recognize the different kinds of knowledge coming from others professions, and in particular knowledge that comes from the public. We need to be

prepared to listen and to engage in debate with others. We invite students to reflect on architecture's various circumstances—context, society, politics, economics. For example, a few years ago, in conjunction with a research group called Postsuburbia, we organized a summer course with guest lecturers from different disciplines around the question of sprawl, and a workshop that proposed to study the problem of suburban dwelling from the perspective of people who are leaving the suburbs because their needs are not being met. From that experience, and based on our research, we established a new approach to rebuilding suburbs. Voir <http://www.postsuburbia.org/> For ten years, I have been engaged with the work of Col.lectiu Punt 6, <http://punt6.org/> an organization that operates from a gender perspective, and seeks to account for the everyday life experience of women. This vision, inclusive of the rest of our society, considers public participation to be an essential instrument in projects and sustainability to be the basic criterion of development. We foster active public participation, and in particular, the participation of women, because it is essential to analyze and highlight everyday life experiences in the urban environment. We have been working in different fields: we conduct feminist research at the intersection of gender and urban planning, as well as research on housing, women's safety, and participatory methodologies, among other topics. We conduct training programs and workshops with government leaders, policymakers, and city planners, focusing on the benefits of including a gender perspective in architecture and urban planning. We contribute to urban projects relating to gender and participatory processes, from diagnosis to evaluation. We also participate in interdisciplinary discourse foster by municipalities today. I left the Col.lectiu last June to become director of planning (for housing, public space, and building maintenance) for the city of Santa Coloma de Gramenet, Ville de 100 000 habitants faisant partie de l'aire métropolitaine de Barcelone. which offered a new opportunity to probe and to develop what I have been doing in my teaching, as a theorist, and as an activist.

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Actively engaged architects

The crisis in Spain has given rise to new practices: Many young architects, such as Santiago Cirugeda, develop projects for which they claim a political dimension. Beyond their short-term responses to the crisis, do they project possible pathways that could be developed more broadly? From your point of view, how can architects working with institutions be politically engaged?

We must differentiate between practices that are invested in producing a better world, and not simply reacting to the crisis. In that sense, the position of Cirugeda is exemplary, because he launched his critical response to reality years before reality began to impact our society. What is very interesting is that the crisis gives birth to discussions and collaborations between architects, professionals in related fields, and citizens. So, we can find civic or neighborhood platforms that fight for the rights of citizens in collaboration with professional and social movements like fem plaça, fem rambla, and PAH. We find proactive groups of architects engaged with the specific conditions of neighborhoods they inhabit in the city and working together with citizens to find solutions (LaCol, Collectif de jeunes architectes barcelonais, voir <http://www.lacol.coop/> Raons públiques, Volta, Equal Saree, Col.lectiu Punt 6, La pell de la Ciutat, Straddle3), and also architects who share experiences and knowledge through the ArquitecturasColectivas network. Last, but not least, various symposia, publications, and blogs focus on the role of women in our profession (un día/una arquitecta, Col.lectiu Punt 6, Equal Saree, Cette association rattachée à l'université de Catalogne voit dans l'architecture et l'urbanisme des vecteurs de changement social. Empruntant la perspective des études de genre, les jeunes femmes architectes qui la composent travaillent sur le terrain pour proposer des environnements adaptés aux situations des femmes indiennes. Voir <http://equalsaree.tumblr.com/> ArquitectAs). Les actes du premier colloque *ArquitectAs (Investigación en Arquitectura y Género)*, qui a eu lieu les 20 et 21 mars 2014 à l'université de Séville, sont publiés: Nuria Alvarez Lombardero, dir., *ArquitectAs, Redefiniendo la profesión*, Séville, Recolectores Urbanos Editorial, 2015.

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