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Atmospheres

Title: Architectural atmosphere and the man-place relationship: the case study of the Dominguez House (1973-1980)

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Keywords: architecture, atmosphere, dwelling, place.

Abstract:

If architecture **reads dwelling as** being simultaneously located in space and exposed to a certain environmental character, **places have to be analysed by means of the categories *space* and *character***. While *space* denotes the three-dimensional organization of the elements which make up a place, *character* signifies the general atmosphere which is the most comprehensive property of any place. A phenomenology of architecture comprises not just a survey of manifest atmospheres but also an investigation of their **concrete determinants**.

Atmosphere is made manifest through the detail: similar spatial configurations can have very different characters according to the concrete solution of their **boundaries**. How a boundary is depends upon its formal articulation, which is again related to the way it is “built”. The outside-inside relation that the boundary establishes offers thresholds, transitions between the inside and the outside, a feeling of being sheltered and, ultimately, a total man-place relationship, a feeling of being in place.

Spanish architect Alejandro De la Sota developed a contemporary understanding of dwelling through the challenging design and construction of the Dominguez House between 1970 and 1980. This domestic project investigates the **boundary as a key element in the relationship between man and place**: man positions himself in place according to his own awareness of being through time. Through the case study of the Dominguez House (Spain), the paper examines the unfolding of an architectural exploration of the concept of dwelling. The work concludes presenting atmosphere as a key element for architecture to offer man a feeling of belonging.

Architectural atmosphere and the man-place relationship: the case study of the Dominguez house (1973-1980)

Dwelling as the meaningful relationship between man and place: the Dominguez house

When we belong somewhere, we dwell, we develop a meaningful relationship with a place. This is the reason why the house has been understood from antiquity as a *microcosmos* where the basic structure of the environment (ground, sky, and encircling horizon) is repeated by the floor, ceiling and walls¹. However, the analysis of those qualities of the house which reveal our belonging and ultimately our place in the world is not a descriptive problem. Although floor, ceiling and walls represent the structure of our own cosmos, it is not a matter of describing their features but of reading the body of images embodied by them. **Through the case study of the exemplary project of the Dominguez house, this paper argues that a meaningful relationship with place is triggered by the creation of atmospheric moods that are pursued through the embodiment of a dwelling image in the concrete of architectural bodies.** First, the paper discusses the project for the Dominguez house starting with the image of the house as a vertically polarised being, with the active man rising upwards to dominate the landscape, before being brought back to rest by the subterranean forces. In the second section, the argument is developed that the concrete develops meaningful relationships with place as embodiment of a dwelling image. The third section discusses architectural atmosphere.

On the image of dwelling: the inquiring gaze

Sota's original conception of dwelling comes as the immediate consequence of man's fundamental search of identity: the inquiring gaze of the active human being aims the sky, and the more elevated that this intellectual search is, the more he aims to the sky. In the first instance, active man's inquiring gaze seeks physical separation from the natural world, overlooking the landscape, as a biological urge². The basic human instinct of climbing up the hill in order to look down into the world as far as the eye can see³ seems to be rooted in our need to find our place in the world, our sense of belonging.

Activity and repose, however, are joined together in Sota's idea of dwelling. We all have our repose moments when we descend close to the ground, then long to overlook the entire horizon from a high place. The two images (*'repose'* and *'flight of being'*⁴) are unmistakable entwined and only constitute one moment of dwelling: the more concentrated the repose, the greater the expansion of the being that emerges from it⁵.

Alejandro de la Sota's image of dwelling is sought through the project of the Dominguez house, as clearly expressed in the project documentation⁶. While the common dwelling type in Spanish architecture locates the public areas of the house at ground level, in relation to the garden, and the more private rooms upstairs, in the Dominguez house the private and the public are inverted, relating the more private realm of the house to the shelter of the ground. By itself, this inversion of accommodation is neither common nor unique; it is the

vertical articulation in relation to the ground line what establishes the tension between the two poles: the elevated rational zone of the intellectualized projects and the buried zone of the domestic withdrawal portray an inquiring man at peace with the surrounding world.

In 1973 Alejandro de la Sota starts working on the design of a single family house based on the initial image of the vertically polarised house. The house has to solve problems of daily coexistence of the Domínguez household: the parents, their seven children and the resident housekeeper. The brief and the site's topography, views, orientation, area and **history cannot be ignored**, and Sota reads and integrates them into the initial idea. The site for the Domínguez house sits within a residential area called A Caeira near Pontevedra (Galicia). In fact, the residential area takes its name from the original estate in the same location that belonged to the Marquis of Riestra in the 19th century, where a mansion and a small family chapel had been built. The original estate had been kept unaltered until the 1960s, when it was bought by a housing developer and subsequently divided into smaller plots. Moreover, the Dominguez house was the first single family house built within the residential area. The architect **tries to maintain the original estate's boundary wall** as visually dominant over the new site's boundary, allowing only a hedge on the plot's limits. The **memory of the former estate** remains through the existing stone wall, an oak, a chestnut tree and the unaltered greenery that then becomes the garden of the new house. The sense of continuity implied in the architect's intention to connect the past of the site to its present results from an understanding of place as something permanent. It is the permanence of the place what enables it to play the role of '*objective truth*'⁷ that can offer man an identity⁸. With emotional and intellectual understanding grounded in the past, our attachment to place has to respect the process of recalling⁹.

The design shown to the client at this stage comprises a glass-clad box materializing the *active* realm of the imagined house: a floating container for open plan living spaces that is detached from the semi-buried sleeping areas related to *repose*, allowing the recalled land to run between the two.

On the concrete of things: overlook and withdrawal

The process of dwelling entails orientation and identification¹⁰: we cannot develop a meaningful relationship with a place if we don't know where and how we are. Our existential image of the surrounding environment is related to its basic structure of ground, sky, and horizon and to both general and particular qualities of a place. Abstract space, therefore, is unlikely to satisfy this existential need because scientific abstraction by itself is not capable of embodying images emerging from within our consciousness and experience.

Architecture, when understood as the frame for human presence, forms the space of inter-subjectivity where we appear for the other and appear as ourselves, finally reaching a sense of belonging that is implicit in the fundamental function of dwelling. Merely intellectual images are detached from the concrete and experienced realm of architecture¹¹. In this notion, architecture may derive from some image emerging from within our consciousness,

but also, as a *concrete body*, it results from our experience of the construction and volumetric qualities that are necessarily achieved by structural means.

This significance of making is based on the understanding that the technical means can be a source of meaning with the guidance of the embodied image. Without this image, the concrete would remain meaningless. This understanding of architecture moves away from intellectual abstraction and returns to the concrete, coinciding with Martin Heidegger's '*unconcealing as the poetic act*'¹². The meaningful act of construction allows experienced space to develop existential manifestations. Those everyday things that are not covered by the pure objects of science gather the contradictions and complexities of the life-world. Man dwells when he manages to concretize the world in buildings and things.

When construction works commence in 1975, the clients are surprised by Sota's decision to change the design by increasing the buried accommodation and slightly modifying the elevated volume. He moves away from the previous project which included garage and play room at ground floor level, making this an inhabited space. The revised and final version of the project wants to preserve the ground running under the elevated volume, with the buried volume blending in with the surrounding landscape, thus emphasizing the vertical tension between the elevated and underground realms.

Finally, the brief is accommodated in two different volumes: the buried volume houses all bedrooms, the garage and the utility areas, with a play room and a cellar under the bedrooms. The elevated volume includes a big living-dining room and the kitchen, with an annexed external terrace and a roof garden. A covered outdoor space runs under the elevated volume with no other function than extending the garden. By removing all specific uses from the ground floor, Sota seeks the clarity of the two realms either side of the ground in the initial image. Only a box made up of translucent glass blocks, and housing the access hall, stairs and lift, occupies part of the ground and connects the two volumes. The buried volume increases its complexity with more accommodation, more skylights and new levels under the garden. The empty space between the two volumes increases, interrupted only by the minimum translucent glazed vertical link, stressing the importance of the natural landscape running under the elevated volume¹³.

On the character of place: architectural atmosphere

When we dwell, the fact that we are simultaneously located in space and exposed to a certain environmental character¹⁴ allows us to orient ourselves and identify with that place respectively. The structure of place has to be analysed by means of the categories *space* and *character*. While *space* denotes the three-dimensional organization of the elements which make up a place, ***character signifies the general atmosphere which is the most comprehensive property of any place.*** Any space is inevitably linked with a character. Paradoxically, *character* is at the same time a more general and a more concrete concept than *space*. On the one hand it indicates a general comprehensive atmosphere, and on the other the concrete form and matter of the boundary, being determined by the technical

realization (“building”). The character of the place is made manifest through the detail: similar spatial configurations can have very different characters according to the concrete solution of the constructed space-defining elements (the *boundary*). The outside-inside relation, which is a basic aspect of concrete space, implies that space has a varying degree of *extension* and *enclosure*. A phenomenology of space has to comprise not just a survey of manifest characters but also an investigation of their concrete determinants. The character is determined by the material and formal constitution of the place, and therefore we should ask: *how* are the boundaries which define the place. How a boundary is depends upon its formal articulation, which is again related to the way it is “built”. Not only the boundary defines the enclosure and stops the space inside, but allows something to ‘*begin its presencing*’¹⁵. The outside-inside relation that the boundary establishes offers thresholds, transitions between the inside and the outside, spaces where to hide, a feeling of being sheltered and wrapped¹⁶, and ultimately it offers the feeling of being in place. Once this idea of wholeness of the perception of the space is acknowledged, the various dimensions of architecture make sense only as a unit, where form, function and construction belong together.¹⁷

Together with considerations for the place where the building is meant to be and the use it will have, the importance of working with all things (sounds, noises, materials, construction...) as experienced is stressed. Space is experienced because it allows life to take place, and in order to do so it has to admit actions. Action admittance depends on spatial configurations, but most importantly, every type of admittance relates to a particular way of dwelling¹⁸. Alejandro de la Sota’s belief that the relevance of architecture lies in the architectural atmosphere comes from this idea: atmosphere allows and triggers certain human actions¹⁹ by which we make the place our own, we live it, and therefore we appropriate it²⁰. Not only our attachment to place is related to procedural memory, in such way that the recorded daily routines that happen in specific places form the basis for a meaningful relationship with place²¹ and therefore our experience of dwelling, but also the environmental atmosphere appeals to an emotional sensitivity²².

When Sota decides to change the design in 1975, the buried volume increases its complexity with more accommodation, more skylights and new levels under the garden, with the ultimate aim of increasing the empty space between the two volumes, interrupted only by a minimum translucent glazed vertical link that represents the vertical progress from one realm to the other. The final revision of the project intensifies the character of each volume and the articulation between them, or more accurately their relationship with the ground line. The elevated volume becomes a white square plan box with metal cladding. The new geometry of the elevated volume does not favour a particular orientation; it offers a platform for the inquiring gaze to observe the sky.

Sota’s imagined house relies on the duality of a higher rational level (*activity*) and a lower irrational level (*repose*), increasingly stretching from earth to sky and becoming oneirically

complete. The dynamism of these moments of dwelling lives in the dialectics of the manifest and the concealed, the balance between the rational and the irrational: the emerging man whose enquiring gaze seeks the horizon will withdraw when in repose. It is the vertical tension allowed by the daily progress from one cosmic realm to the other that promises meaningful explanations to rational beings that seek for a purpose to their existence, inquire about the surrounding world and interpret its meaning.

Conclusion. Atmosphere as enabler of place attachment: a new reading of the Dominguez house.

The image of dwelling sought by Alejandro de la Sota through the construction of the Dominguez house relies on the duality of a higher rational level (*activity*) and a lower irrational level (*repose*), increasingly stretching from earth to sky and becoming oneirically complete. Built space embodies our idea of dwelling, the way we stand on earth under the sky, and experienced space admits the actions involved in this idea of dwelling²³. As this work exposes, both the dwelling image and the actions triggered by the architectural atmosphere are based on the inside-outside relationship offered by the making of the house boundaries, as key elements in the relationship between man and place.

Through the case study of the Dominguez house, this paper argues that a meaningful relationship with place is triggered by the creation of atmospheric moods that are pursued through the embodiment of a dwelling image in the concrete of architectural bodies. As Peter Zumthor²⁴ says, when built space is capable of creating an architectural atmosphere powerful enough to move us, it is concerned with insights, understanding, and meaning.

¹ Ch. Norberg-Schulz, *The concept of dwelling. On the way to figurative architecture* (New York, Rizzoli International Publications, 1985), 91.

² A. De la Sota, 'Conferencia Modernitat i avantguarda' in M. Puente, ed., *Alejandro de la Sota. Escritos, conversaciones, conferencias*. (Barcelona, Gustavo Gili, 2002), p.185

³ Ch. Alexander. *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Constructions*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.316

⁴ G. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space. The classic look at how we experience intimate places*, in M. Jolas (Trans) (Boston, Beacon Press, 1994), 65.

⁵ G. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space. The classic look at how we experience intimate places*, in M. Jolas (Trans) (Boston, Beacon Press, 1994), 66.

⁶ 'the project tries to introduce a deep conceptual change to the single family dwelling': cited in A. De la Sota, *Casa Dominguez Project Documentation*, in Miguel Angel Diaz Camacho. *La Casa Dominguez. Alejandro de la Sota: Construir-Habitar*. Tesis Doctoral. (Madrid, Universidad Politecnica de Madrid, 2012). Appendix A1

⁷ Ch. Norberg-Schulz, *The concept of dwelling. On the way to figurative architecture* (New York, Rizzoli International Publications, 1985), 9.

⁸ The memory of the place can be an enabler of continuity, place attachment and sense of belonging. See Maria Lewicka, 'In search of roots. Memory as enabler of place attachment' in Lynne C. Manzo,

Patrick Devine-Wright, eds., *Place Attachment. Advances in Theory, Methods and Applications*, (London, Routledge, 2014)

⁹ P. Zumthor, *Thinking Architecture* (Berlin, Birkhäuser, 2006), p.17.

¹⁰ Ch. Norberg-Schulz, *The concept of dwelling. On the way to figurative architecture* (New York, Rizzoli International Publications, 1985), 7.

¹¹ P. Zumthor, *Peter Zumthor Therme Vals* in S. Hauser, ed., (Zürich, Verlag Scheidegger & Spiess, 2007), p.37.

¹² K. Nesbitt, *Theorizing a new agenda for architecture. An anthology of architectural theory 1965-1995* (New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), p.494.

¹³ When questioned by the clients, Sota supports his decision on the benefits of a bigger garden. See Miguel Angel Diaz Camacho. *La Casa Dominguez. Alejandro de la Sota: Construir-Habitar*. Tesis Doctoral. (Madrid, Universidad Politecnica de Madrid, 2012): 169

¹⁴ Ch. Norberg-Schulz 'The Phenomenon of Place' in K. Nesbitt, ed., *Theorizing a new agenda for architecture. An anthology of architectural theory 1965-1995* (New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 1996)

¹⁵ M. Heidegger, 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking' in A. Hofstadter, trans., *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York, Harper Colophon Books, 1971), p.152.

¹⁶ P. Zumthor, *Atmospheres. Architectural Environments, Surrounding Objects*, (Berlin, Birkhäuser, 2006), p.47.

¹⁷ P. Zumthor, *Thinking Architecture* (Berlin, Birkhäuser, 2006), p.26.

¹⁸ Ch. Norberg-Schulz, *The concept of dwelling. On the way to figurative architecture* (New York, Rizzoli International Publications, 1985), 25.

¹⁹ Alejandro de la Sota in M. Puente, ed., *Alejandro de la Sota. Escritos, conversaciones, conferencias*. (Barcelona, Gustavo Gili, 2002), p.75

²⁰ Paul Connerton, *How modernity forgets*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.32.

²¹ David Seamon, 'Body-subject, time-space routines, and place-ballets' in A. Buttner, & D. Seamon (eds.), *The human experience of space and place* (New York, St Martin's Press, 1980), pp.148-165.

²² P. Zumthor, *Atmospheres. Architectural Environments, Surrounding Objects*, (Berlin, Birkhäuser, 2006)

²³ Ch. Norberg-Schulz, *The concept of dwelling. On the way to figurative architecture* (New York, Rizzoli International Publications, 1985), 71.

²⁴ P. Zumthor, *Thinking Architecture* (Berlin, Birkhäuser, 2006), p.19.