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THE ART[IST]HOUSE

Focus: a quartet of art-houses
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INSIDE



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lightness of others shows us an ever-possible synergy that gives the home its flexibility back, without turning it into a generic space. At the same time, we cannot be other than amazed by the variety of solutions in which this collaboration may materialise: a myriad of devices studied to dialogue with the space around them. These go from furnishings with an architectural purpose, for example Giò Ponti's writing desk-window, all the way to futuristic experimental inhabitable macro-objects by Joe Colombo or Ettore Sottsass Jr.

FL: This volume has the great merit of throwing new light on a legacy that has almost entirely been left in the dark, recognising its values and suggesting we elect the domestic space as an active place of culture. In its uniqueness each product illustrated makes a loaded passage of continuity and discontinuity, where the harmonies and discords of architectural tradition tell a story, which certainly crosses the circumscribed intimacy of the closely personal experiences of its designer, becoming a testimony of shared cultural values. The architect's house is perhaps recognised for the first time in such a clear way in its specificity as a "cultural heritage", namely as the result of a highly significant process of human existence. The recognition of this new "cultural heritage" brings up another very delicate matter, that involving the ways and possibilities of preserving and conserving its existence. The most plausible route is that of museums, as many similar experiences highlight the difficulties in keeping active those places of culture that tend to fossilise and lose part of their meaning. What horizons is it legitimate to hope for in pursuing the path of the museum display of these artefacts?

GP: In fact, a widespread museum aspect appears to be the only escape route for a legacy that is in continual and quick deterioration. In this sense "architects' homes" share some substantial similarities with other cultural and/or architectural property, requiring maintenance and renovation works. At the same time, they are rather problematic due to their specific conditions of exercise and use: as they are by nature and content a privileged place of intimacy and



privacy, they cannot be completely converted into public areas without losing a consistent part of their testimonial value. It is a particularly difficult exhibit dimension in which the need to regulate the uses allowed in it, or to adapt the space to a rational visit route, collides with the "perverse" desire not to transform the home into a "museum," in order to maintain its domestic dimension as a place of both life and culture. Despite this, the number of home-museums is increasingly growing and some "best practices" are already available as a guide and direction for the future: from the conservation of the Maison de Verre by Pierre Chareau in Paris to that of Frank Lloyd Wright's home in Chicago, and from that of the Weissenhof in Stuttgart to that of Bruno Taut in Berlin⁵. These virtuous examples predict a perhaps Utopian but seductive horizon: the creation of a widespread (European) museum network founded on the transnational value of cultural practices that makes houses belonging to and/or created by a specific architect become places for social integration of different identities. This may be the first, possible, concrete and shared Museum of Europe that has been so longed for, but has always been searched for elsewhere, since we have been unable to realise its actual presence in the homes of twentieth century European architects.

Francesco Lenzi
Gennaro Postiglione

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- 1 I. Chambers, *Le fondamenta disturbate e il linguaggio degli habitat infestati dai fantasmi*, paper in the international conference *Cento case per cento architetti europei del novecento*, October 2001, Milan Triennial.
- 2 We should remember that the very first edition of the book was published for CLUP-Milano in limited edition and in a much more simplified format (one page per author/home) in 2001.
- 3 H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago, 1958. J. Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1962.
- 4 See C. Norberg-Schulz, *L'Abitare*, Milan 1986.
- 5 See M. Boriani, *Le case degli architetti. Conservazione, restauro e ricostruzione?* paper at the international conference *Cento case per cento architetti europei del novecento*, October 2001, Milan Triennial.

Two houses, two lives, one love

Image credits
All photos by Paolo Giardiello and Marella Santangelo

There is a painting, *Mis abuelos, mis padres y yo*, dated 1936, in which Frida Kahlo represents her beloved house as a pedestal for the figure of herself as a child, standing at the centre of the composition with her feet firmly planted on the patio of Casa Azul. Her *hogar*¹ is a living part of her history, the place that will always be in her life and will also be the main stage of her relationship with Diego Rivera. These two Mexican artists, now icons of a country, mark Mexican Novecento with their art and personal stories. Their complex and extremely tormented love story unfolds between the Casa Azul and the Studio-house in San Angel. After the marriage of the "butterfly and the elephant", noticed also on local press due to Diego's fame as a muralist, the newlyweds moved to the center of the Paseo de la Reforma. This has been their first home, furnished with just few pieces of furniture picked up by friends, and here what has been called the "Marxist ménage" has begun. Very soon, however, the difficulties between them and Frida's constant precarious health condition bring them back, for the first time as a married couple, to Casa Azul, that, except for periods that were as tormented as short, will always be Frida's refuge, but also the place where to meet up with Diego. At the same time the studio-house should have been the emblem of love and cultural and artistic partnership, representing the future of a Mexican culture that opened to the world and to Europe. It is no coincidence that the project was entrusted to a young Mexican architect open to new ideas and ready to experiment.

Casa Azul
Casa Azul, today Frida Kahlo Museum, is in the corner between *calle* Londres and Allende a Coyoacán. Originally an independent suburb and today a Mexico City's ancient district, it preserves an important colonial legacy in the proportion between streets and buildings, squares and gardens, as well as in buildings



design: a part of the capital indeed particularly charming and still a bit out of time. Frida's father had it built three years before her birth, in 1904, in a Frenchified neoclassical style, simple and quite austere, with a central space around which an L-shaped building housed the rooms in a typical Porfirian style. Frida leaves and comes back to this house countless times: she comes back after her hospitalization, she comes back for the great bereavements of the family, she comes back to separate herself from Diego, she comes back to start a new life with him. The house is her artist's studio, it is the place where she lectures her students from the School of Art "La Esmeralda", where she collects everything that represents herself and through which she presents herself to the world, the place where she celebrates herself as a vestal virgin of Mexican culture. In some periods it is also her "prison": in 1925, after the accident, when she cannot stand; from 1941 onwards, when her health is increasingly worsening and Frida can



no longer travel and her trips outside the house become fewer and fewer; after the amputation of her right leg, which forces her to remain almost constantly on a wheelchair. The house is modified several times; certainly it was transformed in 1937 to accommodate Leon Trotsky and his wife, exiled in Mexico City, who lived there for a few weeks. To ensure safety to their guests many openings to the street were walled up, the walls were painted light

blue and the Riveras bought another piece of land, adding it to their garden in order to expand the security area around guests. Another moment of large architectural changes takes place in 1941 when at the death of her father, Diego and Frida, who had just got back together after the divorce and married again, decide to move permanently in Casa Azul. During this period the atmosphere is however serene: for Frida taking care of the house becomes an important occupation, as well as taking care of Diego and their reborn relationship. In 1946, Diego asks the architect Juan O’Gorman, who in 1932 had already designed their studio-house in San Angel, to design a new room: Frida’s studio. This is placed in part of the garden and is made of volcanic stone, the same basalt used by the Aztecs for pyramids and ceremonial stones. It is a space full of

light, with large windows overlooking the lush garden in which the artist moved with ease even in the most dramatic moments. Casa Azul appears kind of the sublimation scenography of a love relationship that is among the most complex of world’s artistic history: the relationship between the two of them is from the start the pivot around which their lives unravel, the need for each other never soothes, as well as mutual support to art, everyday life and politics. Diego is Frida’s sole thought, an obsessive love which becomes part of her life for better and for worse. He himself in turn, with his behavior towards other women, pushes her into a large number of heterosexual and homosexual relationships, while in the second part of the artist’s existence he becomes the central reason that gives her the strength to go on suffering and fighting for life.

A year after the return to Casa Azul, Frida starts her diary while trying to turn her refuge in an elected place for Diego and herself, transforming into the vestal of what becomes her “temple.” Through furniture she creates spaces imbued with the spirit of Mexico. It is a delicate period in the history of the country, in the aftermath of independence a new identity must be redefined recovering the original culture. Diego, who has always been fond of folk art, involves Frida and together they start collecting in Casa Azul objects of all kinds, some of which are used daily, some others are just collected. The dining room, always full of guests, is decorated with folk paintings from nineteenth century, still life with fruit and brightly coloured vegetables, portraits of objects of Mexican folk life, which are represented in many of Frida’s last paintings, just when the house isolation

was maximum. On the table around which the best communist and artistic intelligentsia of the time gathered, Frida stretched coloured tablecloths handmade in different Mexican regions and with different techniques, adorned with wax fruit, paper flowers, all forms of tableware and colours. Yellow is the dominant colour of this room: the floor is yellow, the rustic wooden furniture leaning against the walls, mingling with thousands of hanging objects, is yellow, typical figurines and baskets, as the big table in the center of the room, are yellow. The same colour predominates the adjacent kitchen, where yellow and blue tiles cover the workbench and the opposite wall. In this room the walls are decorated with tools and pottery of all types, shapes and materials; on one of the walls a pair of doves holding a ribbon is designed with multi-coloured mosaics, the names of Diego and



Frida, made with the same technique, decorate the main wall of the kitchen as to emphasize its role as the central place of the house. Using colours and poor objects of great artistic value, mixing old and new, tradition with modernity, embellishing the house becomes a daily occupation to Frida. Casa Azul is always full of friends, relatives and guests, and every evening the kitchen table is full of diners. All this strengthens the relationship with her *hogar*, which, at the same time, becomes a place of inner solitude. High walls decorated with traditional Mexican motifs, mosaics, sea shells and pitchers that Diego personally positions recessed into the walls surround and protect the house garden, full of luxuriant plants that extend their branches, mainly magnolias and *ahuehuetes*, but also cypress trees and tropical plants. Among

the thick vegetation there are many animals: birds, especially doves, the parrot Bonito, but also the beloved spider monkey Fulang-Chang. In the same years, at the center of the garden, they build a small Aztec pyramid that serves as a podium for Diego’s pre-Columbian artefacts. In the meantime he starts the pharaonic construction project of a “sepulcher studio,” a kind of museum of itself through which leaving his mark for posterity and preserving more than sixty thousand pre-Columbian art objects collected over twenty years. In this oasis and prison, Frida spends the last years of her life: no longer having the strength to reach the center of Mexico City, she receives students of the art school and leaves them wandering around Coyoacán in search of something to paint, giving them the chance to work in the garden, where from time to time she goes to check their work.



A living and significant testimony of the atmosphere of Casa Azul is given by a large number of photographs. Frida’s archive consists of about six thousand pictures: she was photographed by the best authors of the time, also photographing herself since childhood, following her father Guillermo, a professional photographer. These pictures show that many people were part of Diego and Frida’s life, as of the life in Casa Azul: friends, fellow party members, lovers. It is the most public face of this unique couple, but also the most spontaneous, the one that tells of a Frida distracted from pain and from her curse, smiling in the arms of her friends. Among the most beautiful pictures are those of Nicholas Muray, her lover for about ten years, which portrayed her several times in Casa Azul - with her animals, while painting, in the wheelchair - thus showing many corners of the house and beautiful views of the garden, returning the feeling of warmth and Frida’s belonging to that place and its spaces. At her death her ashes were gathered by Diego in a bag and brought to Casa Azul, the bag was placed on Frida’s four-poster bed and covered with her chalk death mask. Later the ashes were moved to a pre-Columbian amphora with the features of a headless woman and on its top was placed a pedestal that supported the bronze mold of the same mask. So Frida Kahlo has never left her *hogar*.

Studio-house in San Angel
Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo studio-house in San Angel in Mexico City, is a rigorous example of functionalist architecture, a work adherent to the

rationalist language that, as has been told by the designer Juan O’Gorman², when it was made «caused quite a stir because, until then, it had never been seen in Mexico a building whose form totally derived from the function»³. The young architect, only twenty-six when he is made responsible for the design of the house of the nation’s most famous couple of artists, does not hide wanting to faithfully adhere to the principles of functionalist architecture – to the ideal for which “form follows function” - also stating that «architecture responds to the needs of the moment, with appropriate technology and maximum economy»⁴. Returning from California, Diego decided to commission young O’Gorman his and Frida’s studio-house, thanks to the money earned in the United States. He was fascinated by these principles inherent the new architecture and believed that “rationality” was not to be regarded as contrary to art and that functional minimalism, economy and construction minimalism could be considered as indicators of an artistic attitude, since anything that is «strictly made on functional criteria is also a work of art»⁵. Today, after time and after the individual lives of the various people involved in this adventure have written the fascinating and complex storyline of one of the most important periods in recent Mexican history, we can say that O’Gorman’s design is to be considered not only as a relevant episode of architecture but rather the shape of a new lifestyle, a cultural idea. Even more, in relation to Diego and Frida’s personal story, San Angel house can not only be considered the material

realization of a functional program, the fulfillment of some private life needs; it is simplistic to believe that it is only “shape of the function”, the materialization of practical needs, because the artifact thus conceived is to all effects, perhaps unintentionally, “shape of the content”, extreme synthesis of meaning and significance. Diego and Frida’s house is not the mere representation of daily needs, in particular domestic and artistic ones, it is rather the story, the material and formal construction of their lives, their intense and stormy ties, their union and ultimately their love.

Although at the time O’Gorman has the experience of a single built architecture, from the beginning he is aware of his delicate task, fully acknowledging the responsibility of having to deal with two special and demanding “clients”, whose social, political and artistic commitment is indelibly linked to the construction of their country’s identity. Nevertheless, at the beginning of his career, to make their house, O’Gorman does not imagine something “traditional or vernacular”, does not seek references to local archeology, but declines the principles of rational architecture, making them extreme, going beyond the same technological solutions developed by Le Corbusier for house Ozenfant ten years earlier – the “house for an artist” that is the natural reference for the young Mexican architect - inserting on them, in an innovative way, further elements of that native culture, that popular consciousness, that long tradition of which the couple was interpreter. The house, built in a lot on the corner between *calle de Palmas* and *avenida Altavista*, designed in 1931 and completed the following year, is actually made of two studio-houses joined together: a larger and powerful one destined to Diego, who was 21 years older than Frida and with a massive and imposing physique, and a smaller one, almost small and frail as Frida’s physic, linked to the first one only by a bridge at roof height, therefore through a path clearly more symbolic than functional. Diego’s double height studio is only open north, in order to capture the right light for the painter’s atelier through a huge sloping glass wall which overlooks the back of the lot, away from roads and noise; Frida’s workspace, instead, is open on three sides and light can enter at any hour of the day. The outside is visible from the studio and privacy and light intensity can be modulated through the curtains hanging along the entire perimeter. The differences between the two houses are obvious, even the main stairs, although

within language and stylistic solutions of Modern Movement, are one outside and one inside the house. Therefore one is clear and blatant and the other is hidden, to be discovered. They are clearly inspired to solidity and plasticity and to lightness and discretion up to the limit of matter inconsistency and unpredictability of the external route which connects to the terrace of Frida’s house. Then the house parts, the two joined blocks, are shaped as the protagonists’

lives and characters: one direct, without detours, precise and determined and the other delicate, intimate, internal, constantly broken by pain, accidents and disease. The bridge is the wonderful materialization of their relationship, the poetic underlining of two lives that to be united needed to be separated, independent. In fact the bridge that unites them is not a direct connection, it is quite an articulated and complex path, the result of a long and weighted choice in which it is necessary to climb

through external stairs up to the terrace, passing from one block to the other, being exposed to sun or bad weather in order to reach the destination, and, at last, slowly descending back to the everyday spaces of the other. In short, far more than sheer functionality was originally intended both from the designer and the clients. The purist language and stereometric forms become the suitable place to house the couple’s works, which are complex artistic expressions, articulated, always full of colours and crowded of real and mythical characters, but it is also suitable to preserve the precious memories in form of traditional objects, archaeological artefacts and souvenirs of their travels. Finally the rationalist lexicon is declined in a vernacular tone, made impure and transformed, it therefore adapts to the suggestions of traditional Central American architecture, starting from the colours that, unlike architectures adhering to “international style”, in addition to white, used discreetly, adopts red and blue, therefore referencing to Mexican customs. That’s not all, in the presence of essential technical solutions, to the limit of “brutalism” - visible electrical and plumbing systems, external tanks and gutters, intrados of the interior floors exposed and without plaster - O’Gorman encloses the lot with a fence of cactus plants, resulting in a stark contrast between house and urban space from which the house separates through the marks of “local nature”, tamed and reused. Not for many years the house will be the stage of the couple’s life. In San Angel the two artists live together for a short time and the house also sees their painful, although temporary, separation when Frida becomes aware of the affair between her sister Cristina and Diego and definitively abandons the house: it’s 1934 when she leaves forever San Angel and moves to the center where she lives alone. O’Gorman’s work, the bold functionalist architecture that had aroused so much curiosity in public opinion, in later years will be used only by Diego as a studio. Perhaps from all this and from the difficulty to understand and justify Frida and Diego’s life today it is possible to attribute the house they wanted for themselves in San Angel the status of icon and symbol. This is a sort of monument to their love, a temple where to live together a nonetheless difficult relationship, marked by Frida’s physical pain, in full respect of their independence and needs, passions and daily little quirks, but above all immersed in their art.

Paolo Giardiello

Marella Santangelo

translation by Giovanna Russo Krauss



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The study on the two houses and on the lives of both artists has been further examined by the authors in: M. Santangelo, *Lo spazio del corpo. I templi di Frida Kahlo*, LetteraVentidue, Siracusa 2014 and P. Giardiello, *Narrare con l'architettura*, in AREA, Vol. 108, Milan 2010.

1 Hogar, is a term in the Castilian language impossible to translate in English, it indicates much more than a house, it's a person's own place, the intimate space, it can be translated with home, hearth, roof; *sin hogar* is used to indicate a homeless man instead of *sin casa*, but *hogar* beyond being a physical place is a place for the soul.

2 Juan O’Gorman, born in 1905, died in 1982 in Mexico City, Mexico.

3 Cf. V. Jiménez, *Juan O’Gorman*, Mexico D. F. 1997.

4 *Ibidem*.

5 *Ibidem*.

Image credits

All photos by Federico Calabrese

Just as in pictures, we can figure some moments of the life of the couple formed by the architect Lina Bo Bardi and the art dealer and critic Pietro Maria Bardi in their house built in 1951, in the city of São Paulo, Brazil.

In a first picture the couple is accommodated in front of the fireplace in the wide living room of their house. The two are surrounded by friends, many of them artists and intellectuals, and are also in the company of their dogs and cats. Around them are arranged armchairs, chairs, stools, tables, shelves and lamps with modern, classical and popular features. Visitors can lounge on a Le Corbusier Chaise-Longue, sit in a 16th century Italian armchair or squat on popular Brazilian footstools. In the room there are also many pieces of furniture designed by Lina Bo Bardi, among them the Bardi’s Bowl, specifically made for the house. There are also works of art of different types, origins and historical periods: a Roman statue, an oriental Buddha, Baroque saints, *candomblé* pieces, all among other everyday objects. On the walls there are abstract, figurative and primitive paintings. In the corners of the room there are popular toys and utilitarian objects such as oil lamps, mugs, bowls, etc. Some visitors are taking a look at the couple’s records and books, or rooting around their desks in search for papers, pens, pencils and many other junks. Others are seated at the dining room table tasting some appetizers and drinking a *caipirinha*.

In a second one Lina and Pietro are in the kitchen of the house. In front of them there’s a strip window that allows them to observe the nature around. On the side wall there is an abstract painting, while on the upper wall there are modern ceiling lamps. On the aluminium counter there is a vase



Bardi’s fusion: the house as a museum, the museum as a house



with flowers and a ceramic chicken egg holder. The dishes can be found in a closet with fabric curtains. Lina is a very good cook and prepares a dish that gathers tastes, colours and textures, made in an industrial oven. There are several modern accessories around to make the kitchen’s routine easier. Meanwhile breads are being baked in the wood-burning oven that stands outside the house, in the vicinity of the kitchen.

In a third picture the residents appear in the garden of the house. They walk through some paths delimited by low walls, the surfaces of which are covered with broken coloured ceramic tiles and pebbles. There’s also a cement plate with an engraved cat, probably drawn by Lina. Around them, there is a Brazilian forest with lots of trees and flowers. On their way they find armadillos, sloths, turtles, parrots and many other animals. They pause to admire the fish pool that contains some Victoria Regias. They proceed all the way down to the architect’s atelier, conceived as a small hut.

The house is built in a newly opened allotment located in the Morumbi neighbourhood in the industrial city of São Paulo. It has a prominent position in a sloping terrain that is partially deforested in its frontal part, calling the attention of the inhabitants of the surrounding area, who named it House of Glass. This denomination corresponds to a part of the house, the one that assumes a modern characteristic, composed by a large prismatic block suspended on metallic pilotis, surrounded by glass panels, pierced by a delicate staircase. This is the social part of the house, where there are the living room, the dining room and an office, all arranged around a patio. The other part of the house is placed directly on the ground, with brick