The 16<sup>th</sup> International Docomomo Conference Tokyo Japan 2020+1 Proceedings

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Inheritable Resilience:
Sharing Values of Global Modernities VOLUME 2

EDITORS Ana Tostões Yoshiyuki Yamana

- 04. Technological / Material Legacies
- 05. Regional Timber Structure
- of. Pedagogies of Docomomo
- 07. Documentation and Dissemination



## Inheritable Resilience

Sharing Values of Global Modernities

**EDITORS** 

ANA TOSTÕES YOSHIYUKI YAMANA

## The 16<sup>th</sup> International Docomomo Conference Tokyo Japan 2020+1 Proceedings

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#### HOUSES WITH A NAME. TOWARDS AN INVISIBLE HERITAGE

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#### ABSTRACT.

The collection *Houses with a name*, of which two titles have already been published, demonstrates the pertinence that an editorial project such as this can have in documenting and conserving the heritage of the Modern Movement, while also highlighting the didactic potential offered by a combination of architectural research, literary writing, illustrations and graphic design.

This paper begins with a critical look at the project's antecedents in the history of architectural theory, examining both the particular interest of the houses of the Modern Movement (seen from the viewpoint of the writing of their stories, and even the rewriting of their history) and the potential that this research strategy and the subsequent dissemination of knowledge can have for conserving and revitalising the architectural heritage of this period.

The project *Houses with a name* offers a critical rereading of the History of the Modern Movement, removing some taboos and preconceptions, by recognising the artistic and human dimension of these architectures, habitually regarded as purely object-like icons. It recovers the Corbusian (and not literally mechanistic) expression of a *machine for living in*, as a metaphysical or (as Le Corbusier would say) a *spiritual* idea.

The experience acquired in the editing, publication, launch and reception of the collection by both children and adults highlights the importance of the book as an aesthetic object, itself also a form of architecture, underlining the renewed recognition that the narrated architectures reacquire through the readings of their stories and the rereading of the history of our discipline.

#### 1. OVERTURE

When discussing the documentation and conservation of modern heritage, it is perhaps pertinent to mention a project such as the collection of illustrated children's stories, "Casas com nome" (Houses with a name), due to its experimental nature in the context of more conventional architectural research. This editorial project is paradoxically centred around an old common place — the house. "Let's talk about houses as people talk about their souls", said the poet Herberto Helder, thus using words to draw the invisible side of architecture.

Widely explored in literature, philosophy and other areas of knowledge, the theme of the house has been reduced by the mother discipline to a set of views that are either overly academic or — just as bad — images crystallised as heritage corpses with no interior life. This invisible side, evoked by Herberto Helder, is particularly interesting because it offers us clues for further consolidating the time-lessness of these architectures.

It would be interesting to begin by revealing the antecedents and references that preceded our work.

Challenging the very limits of architecture as a discipline, the stories that are told in these books, besides being real ones based on documentary evidence, also contain elements of fable, novel, prose, illustration, drawing and composition. Paradoxically, the project's unequivocally experimental nature similarly has several very solid points of support grounded in tradition.

As in all architectural acts, and despite their inseparability, this project's points of support can be divided into both

theoretical and practical ones.

From the practical point of view, we have the houses and their stories, as we shall see later on. From the theoretical point of view, which is where we begin this essay, we can find some antecedents that should be considered in this context, namely some examples taken from the treatise writers, whose affinities we shall attempt to point out.

Special emphasis is given to two of these authors: Filarete and Palladio.

#### 2. FILARETE AND THE BOOK OF ARCHITECTURE

Filarete is mentioned here because of the simple and evident correlation that exists between the pages of his treatise<sup>2</sup>, written in his own hand, just like the naïve drawings that illustrate the text and afford the document an almost child-like tone, in the substantial sense of this term.

As far as these illustrations are concerned, their apparent ingenuousness derives from Filarete's choice to draw them in perspective (frequently "not a very rigorous one"). It was in this way that he sought to explain and illustrate the ideas conveyed in the text.

Or, in other words, Filarete removed all of the technical and disciplinary emphasis from his document, making it accessible to everyone (indeed, it is perhaps not by chance that *The Book of Architecture*, as Filarete liked to entitle his treatise, was written in the vernacular language — and not in Latin — so that it could be more widely understood).

Again, as far as the writing is concerned, Filarete chose to use the form of a dialogue (which came from the ancients and which Filarete recovered) between the commissioner of

the work and the architect, or, in other words, in the form of an invented conversation between the Duke of Milan, Francesco Sforza, and himself.

Above all, these dialogues have a didactic dimension that is underlined by the client's permanent doubts and by the architect's attempts to respond to his queries more clearly.

#### 3. PALLADIO AND THE FOUR BOOKS OF ARCHITECTURE

Palladio's treatise, to which he gave the name of *The Four Books of Architecture*<sup>3</sup>, was also written in the vernacular, so that it could be read and understood by everyone, and it was accompanied by didactic illustrations (rigorously chosen and drawn), to which the text makes permanent references. Here the ideas are always constructed from the presence of the text and the images alongside one another.

Palladio, however, replaced Filarete's dialogues by placing the client himself in the short history (which can also be read as if it were a project brief) that narrates the purpose of each of his private works (we are referring, above all, to houses, whether in the form of urban palaces or in the form of rural villas).

In Palladio, the houses, whether designed or built, take the name of the clients themselves, through the author's own initiative. In the writing of the treatise, he actually highlighted this most important piece of information, underlining it through the use of capital letters, as we can see in Villa Almerico<sup>4</sup>, better known today as the Villa Capra (because it was later bought by the Capra brothers), or as the Villa La Rotonda (because of its centralised floor plan, a typological option that evidently reflects the fundamental premises of the design itself).

Each house, as we ourselves would say, has its own name, and they are each described and justified in the treatise, where even the project's fundamental typological and urbanistic options are discussed and, in the more interesting cases, considered from the point of view of the client's own wishes and intentions. The Villa La Rotonda, with its four iconic porticoes turned to face the four cardinal points, has been disseminated across the whole world, but that apparently objectual architecture is the result of a very intimate dialogue between the architect, the place and the client.

What we can see in the example taken from Palladio, more so than in Filarete, is the association of a name with a house as the moment when the experience of that concrete architectural object becomes more intense, or, in other words, as the theme of the project.

#### 4. OTHER LENSES

We believe that architecture (like art) gains another meaning, another density, when it is seen through a lens that tells the history of its process.

Narrating that story therefore gains even greater impor-

tance as an essential element for the appreciation of architecture, without which the sensory and aesthetic experience of the finished object is penalised because of the merely superficial appreciation that the five senses can give us in only a limited manner.

That is why this story — precisely in its condition as History — is absolutely indispensable to the architectural experience and, because it is indispensable, it deserves to be (and must be) told. And this can be done in many different ways - either in a more documentary tone, or in a more romanticised manner, to the point where one may discuss whether, in the world of cinema, the documentary is the most appropriate cinematic genre for enabling us to see and understand architecture, when compared with films in general. Apropos of this, we could give countless examples of films that, more than any documentary register, have immortalised architectures and cities in such a way as to encapsulate their very essence. In other words, frequently by filming houses as period pieces, they enable us to see the use and effective experience of architecture by people, even if these are themselves personified by characters in a film.

And the same could be said of literary writing in general, and particularly of the novel, which, in a certain way, is immediately present in Filarete's *Book of Architecture*.

## 5. THE MODERN MOVEMENT EXPLAINED TO CHILDREN

The project *Houses with a name* set out to return to this line of thinking, but at the very moment when the appropriate register was found for a sensitive and didactic narrative construction that could be understood by everyone (especially non-architects), it embarked upon the path of Lyotard's *The postmodern explained to children*, a title whose formulation we have appropriated here. In other words, it was thought that the best way to tell the brief histories of the houses of the modern movement (which, in our view, and to quote yet another treatise writer from Renaissance times, "needed to be saved from extinction", as Alberti used to say about ancient architecture) would be through a book "ironically 'designed' for children" in which the illustrations, together with the text, open the doors of children's imagination, which, ultimately, we all continue to safeguard.

As far as Docomomo is concerned, the *Houses with a* name that have been chosen for this collection<sup>8</sup> are always related with the Modern.

Obviously, what these houses escape is not the commonplace (which does not present a problem, as Heinrich Tessenow's small houses clearly show), but stereotyping, insofar as the negative, pre-formatted and pre-determined aspects of a house are concerned, in a child's free and open imagination.

Contrary to the way it may seem, modern houses are particularly stimulating for the purposes of storytelling. They are *machines for living in*, accordingly to the original





Fig. 1. Joana Couceiro, Mariana Rio, A casa do senhor Malaparte and A casa da doutora Farnsworth, Porto, Circo de Ideias, 2015, 2018, book covers. © Circo de Ideias and authors.

sense that have been given to the expression by Le Corbusier himself, or, in other words, in the sense of their being mechanisms for dwelling purposes. The expression *machines for living in* does nothing more than convey the dramatic intensity that endures in the brief histories associated with these houses and which we have sought to recover through this collection, as well as, perhaps, in the already-mentioned expression used by Alberti, saving them from extinction.

#### 6. HOUSES WITH A NAME

In the formulation of their titles, A casa do senhor Malaparte and A casa da doutora Farnsworth (Fig. 1), both of which have already been published, are books that confirm the erasure of the authorship of the houses and its replacement with the name of their inhabitants.

The process of constructing these histories is always the same: first of all, research, as if it were an architectural object that needed to be dissected; then putting together all the photographic images from that period, as well as up-to-date ones, on which the effects of time and use have left their marks; and, after this, reflecting on what explains, and doesn't explain, what we can only intuit; and then, finally, writing a text to be read to (or by) a child who, in the end,

may be any one of us (Fig. 2). In this way, this writing attempts to assume the musicality that is peculiar to the nonsense poems and tongue-twisters of the oral tradition, not denying the rhyme nor ending there. It is a form of writing that seeks to use the sound of the words and their multiple meanings to emphasise both the drama and the restfulness of the stories.

(...)

Doctor Edite is a different woman,
a 'fish out of water'
(as we usually say).

Mies, the architect, accepted the enormous challenge. He invented a house that looks like an aquarium, but without water, for the 'fish out of water' to live in.

Edite liked the idea.
The 'fish out of water',
inside the aquarium without water,
was finally able to feel like a fish in water.
(...)

A casa do senhor Malaparte and A Casa da doutora

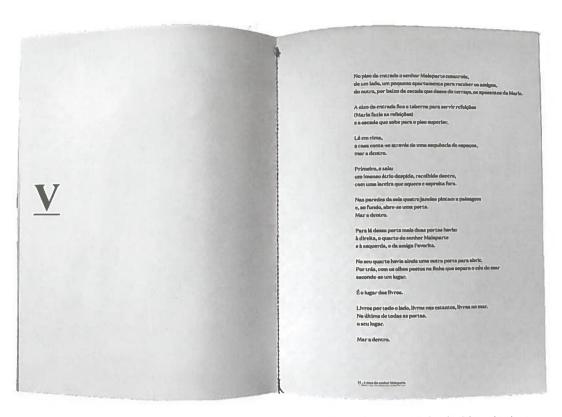


Fig. 2. Joana Couceiro, Mariana Rio, A casa do senhor Malaparte, Porto, Circo de Ideias, 2015, chapter 5, p.20, 21. © Circo de Ideias and authors.

Farnsworth enhance the possibilities of a very intense reading of these buildings, both from the point of view of the architectural objects and their domesticity.

They are books that, while being about architecture, seek to talk about these houses "as people talk about their souls", linking them to the life within them: architects who are the client, clients who themselves become the architect, relationships that are built with the houses, relationships that end with them...

They are books that explore these architectures according to a literary and image-based dimension, making it possible to reach a wider audience, without any constraints, as well as to penetrate into common territories.

They are, therefore, books that cannot be categorised, filled with an interpretive intensity and an explanatory potential that can be measured by the child's constant need to ask "why?", when faced with the unknown.

#### 7. TOWARDS AN INVISIBLE HERITAGE

At the various launches of the books, we witnessed this thirst for knowledge. The reading of the text aloud and the analysis of the illustrations (by the writer and the illustrator) gave rise to a number of questions, doubts and problems that, significantly, focused on the real existence of the built

houses as architectural artefacts that the authors dissected in front of the children through photographs (often records from the particular period) or that they simply invoked by thinking aloud (Figs. 3 & 4). The real short histories associated with those houses reacquired, at that moment, the utmost importance in the exegesis of the text and its illustrations. Significantly, also, the adults who accompanied the children were interested in the density that was conferred upon the chosen houses: from the gestation of these architectures (i.e. the history of the vicissitudes of their designs) to the narrative sequel that was set in motion through their appropriation by the inhabitants.

Those Houses with a name were (and may they continue to be) genuine living bodies, with a soul, identity and name.

The material and concrete reality of architecture is the built work, at the time, today and in the future. However, there is always an immaterial dimension to architecture that is not exhausted in its stones (which Aristotle referred to as metaphysics) and which remains in the collective space through this little Great Oral Tradition. This oral tradition has resonances that are recognised by the author herself; in the writing of Agustina Bessa-Luís (to take an example from Portuguese literature). It is inseparable from the very reality of things, which is, in itself, contradictory and paradoxical, always depending on people's points of view (just as archi-

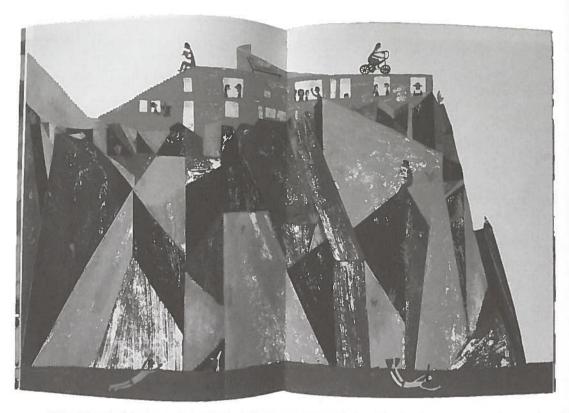


Fig. 3. Joana Couceiro, Mariana Rio, A casa do senhor Malaparte, Porto, Circo de Ideias, 2015, chapter 4, p.18, 19. © Circo de Ideias and authors.

tectures are: always complex and contradictory, as Venturi would say).

This reality could be observed in the way that the children talked about the stories of the *houses with a name* after the book launches, frequently posing absolutely pertinent questions that the story, History, indeed both of them, can never manage to completely answer. For example, in the passionate dispute between Edite Farnsworth and Mies: who, after all, was right?

#### 8. FINALE

From everything that has been said, it can be concluded that we are in agreement with the idea that Le Corbusier expressed when he said that "rien n'est transmissible que la pensée."

In other words, once the question of the flood plain at the *Farnsworth* house had been dealt with, it was the past history of its permanent flooding that remained with us through the fable of the *Casa Farnsworth*, transformed into a large fish tank, which the illustration has transfigured into an icon and, in that sense, if the text represents a reference to the oral tradition, then the illustrations amount to a kind of iconography of the *Houses with a name*.

Seen from a future perspective, this collection will continue to be a documentary source of those architectures, even though, as happened to the treatise of Vitruvius, one day all the images may be lost, or, as Alberti said about *De Architectura*, the text becomes relatively incomprehensible since, in his own words, "to the Latins, it seems Greek, while to the Greeks it seems Latin."

This essay seeks to reflect on the role that an editorial project such as this can play in conserving the fatally lost soul of these houses of our modern heritage, as well as to defend literary narrative and artistic illustration as ways of disseminating and safeguarding the history (now invisible to the naked eye) of the countless *Houses with a name* that modern architects have heroically succeeded in building.

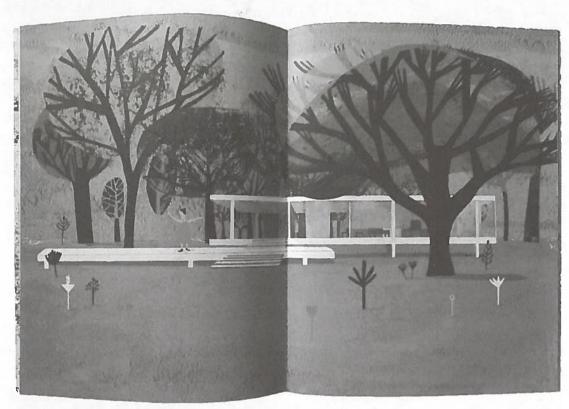


Fig. 4. Joana Couceiro, Mariana Rio, A casa da doutora Farnsworth, Porto, Circo de Ideias, 2018, chapter 3, p.14,15. © Circo de Ideias and authors.

#### NOTES

- 1 Casas com nome is the title of a collection published by Circo de Ideias, written by Joana Couceiro and illustrated by Mariana Rio.
- 2 Filarete, Trattato di architettura (2 Vols.), Milano, Il Polifilo, 1972, 1st ed., 1460–1464/5.
- 3 Palladio, Il quattro libri dell'Architettura The Four Books of Architecture, New York, Dover, 1965, 1st ed., 1570.
- 4 Idem, 41.
- 5 We mention, by way of example, the work of the Smithsons (the Economist Building) in the film Blow Up (1966), by Michelangelo Antonioni; or the Casa Malaparte Itself in Jean-Luc Godard's Le Mépris (1963), or even the city of Porto in Douro, Faina Fluvial (1931), by Manoel de Oliveira, a testimony to a Porto that now only exists in the film.
- 6 Jean-François Lyotard, O pós-moderno explicado às crianças, correspondência 1982-1985, Lisboa, Publicações Dom Quixote, 1987.
- 7 Jean-François Lyotard, op. cit., [a note by the French publisher], 9-10.
- 8 Although it may undergo some alterations, the plan for the collection includes the following books: A casa do senhor Malaparte [published], architect, Adalberto Libera, 1942: A casa da doutara Farnsworth [published], architect, Mies van der Rohe, 1945–51: A casa da mãe Carlota [in progress], architect, Le Corbusier, 1923: A casa da avó Vanna, architect, Robert Venturi, 1962–64; A casa da família Muller, architect, Adolf Loos, 1930; A casa de férias dos Smithsons, Alison & Peter Smithson, 1959–62.
- 9 Joana Couceiro, A casa da doutora Farnsworth, Porto, Circo de Ideias, 2018, 13.
- 10 Le Corbusier, Œuvre Complète, W. Boesiger (ed.), Zurich, Les Editions d'Architecture, 1965, Vol. 8, 168. This a reference to the publisher's note, which accompanies the quoted title: "The following was written by Le Corbusier one month before his death. It is the last thing he ever wrote. It reads like an autobiographical monograph, like an intellectual testament, or like the dialogue of a man with himself in the act of summing up his life's work."

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