

A HANDFUL OF AIR

House in Alenquer of Manuel and Francisco Aires Mateus

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"To make a house, you take a handful of air and hold it with walls". It would seem that the Aires Mateus brothers have punctually complied with the words of this Nasrid proverb, because that, holding the air with walls, is what they have done in this beautiful house, built out of time and within the space of beauty.

SUBLIMATED RUIN

Empty boxes

The architects say in their brief report that they have only "consolidated and repaired the old walls of the old house". I believe they have done much more: they have sublimated them. The double box was at the beginning a silent ruin. And they have made it speak. They have enhanced it by manipulating it, opening and closing it and unifying it with a radiant white color. And they have placed a wooden floor on it, like a tray, so that the pieces take on a greater presence. And at the end it has been filled with light. It all has a certain metaphysical air that brings to mind some of De Chirico's images. With tremendous force.

When a ruin preserves its walls with a materiality capable of trapping air and light, when gravity still builds space in it, architecture, stripped of everything, is clearly shown to us in its most radical form. The pure nakedness of the structure often has the powerful force of the most essential architecture. So do some of the walls of many Roman ruins that move us. So do the walls of the empty boxes of this house.

THE FRAMED SKY

The house of water.

Perhaps the most outstanding quality of these spaces is the verticality that has been accentuated as an attribute of these two boxes that once supported more than one floor and are now free in their full height. The unusual proportion, never thought of by the primitive builder of these walls, produces a certain fascination in us. The high box of the pool, like a jewel box for the water contained therein, produces, either by its reflection on the water or by its transparency, an effect of maximum verticality.

Proportion is still today, and always will be, an effective instrument with which to work in architecture. Although someone might believe that in this passing earthquake that shakes the so-called avant-garde architecture today, this attribute, proportion, might seem to have disappeared. The proportion that is the domain of scale.

I would like to observe here how the empty box of the pool seems higher than the other in which the disproportion of the interstitial spaces could make us think that there is more verticality in them. On the contrary, sitting inside the water box, our gaze goes upwards,

towards the framed sky, bringing to our memory the Pantheon in Rome. Framing the air of the sky.

THE CAMERA

If we analyze the house containing functions housed in the second box, we must recognize that it is like a perfect clockwork mechanism, it works so well. But if we analyze the precision with which each piece focuses on the landscape through double filters of windows and holes, the simile of the camera would be more appropriate. And if we said that the water box looks at the sky, this house box looks at the earth.

The functions are impeccably resolved. Downstairs the public space, living, cooking, eating, with a view of the landscape more focused than framed. Upstairs, maximum privacy in the small rooms, each with a different view. Like a camera.

AND LIGHT

This whole house in the end is nothing more than a very bright exercise in light. The white light cut into the shadow cast dances on the surface of the excavated water is a scene to behold. The solid light moves throughout the day against a background of reflected light that fills the air that fills these sublime boxes and produces effects of the utmost beauty.

PIÈCE DE RESISTENCE

It's been a while since this house was built and it still looks like it was just finished. So out of time is the result. But in the personal history of its authors I dare say it is a crucial point. Great architects have always made a house capable of being remembered, capable above all of synthesizing their whole understanding of architecture. The Farnsworth House for Mies Van der Rohe is as or more significant than the impressive Crown Hall in Chicago. Or the Villa Savoie for Le Corbusier is no less important than the Tourette. And Palladio is as much or more Palladio in his Villa Rotonda than in his magnificent Basilica in Vicenza. Beyond their limited physical dimension, these houses have the immense size with which they have gone down in the history of architecture. For the Aires Mateus the house in Alenquer is and will always be a strong point.

QUIET MUSIC

Walking around the house this past summer, and being already surrendered to the calmness contained there, the dry sound of a plunge was heard. The murmur of the lapping water added one more degree of evocation to the serenity of those spaces. To my memory came that verse of Fray Luis de León, so appropriate to this architecture: "The air is serene and dressed in unused beauty and light, Salinas, when the quiet music sounds, governed by your divine hand". Serenity and beauty that the Alenquer house exudes to the highest degree.