

any country, we have to pay careful attention to the technical specifications card to know where they are.

Zolkwer: There are technologies, economies and a cultural canon that crosses every country. Perhaps there are more aesthetic, cheaper and universal ways to resolve architecture.

There is a universally “correct” architecture which does not run so many risks.

Another one of the relationships or nearness is sustained by small scale works, near installation. In these works, it is interesting that actually, the setting up of a cheap architecture or of recycled materials has nothing to do with a discourse about it. There are questions which clamor in any place of the earth: what is architecture, what is our role as designers and what kind of world we want to build. The only certain thing is that we want a more just and diverse world. And that the place where we are born marks our identity, but does not dictate our destiny. [in](#)

NOTES

(1) Population 2010: 2.562.963 inhabitants. Foundation: 1960

(2) Giancarlo Mazzanti (Barranquilla, 1963): Colombian architect, a symbol of the social transformation of Medellín. He won the first prize at the Biennale di Venezia (2006, town planning and landscape design).

(3) Parque-Biblioteca España (Santo Domingo neighbourhood) and Parque-Biblioteca León de Greiff (La Ladera neighbourhood).

(4) Paraguayan architect (Asunción, 1963), winner of the BSI Swiss Architectural Award (Lugano, 2007).

1. The Biennial and the jungle

2. Talking around the world

Two interviews with Mirta Demare

Stephane Damsin, Max Zolkwer, Ana Rascovsky and Manuel de Rivero

Abstract

In these two interviews, the first done in 2002 and the second in 2011, Mirta Demare analyzes her work planning refugee camps and speaks about the role art has in her life. Demare explains the problems suffered by war refugees, very different from those faced by people who are forced to leave their homeland because of natural disasters, and describes the creative process as well as the way in which the settlements work.

Demare talks about her theoretical referents and tells about her work in Argentine cooperatives at the beginning of the 70s and her work around the world with international organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Federation of the Red Cross, the European Union and the World Bank. She details the characteristics that a place needs to meet in order to receive refugees and the challenges implied in the maintenance of security, especially for the women.

In 35 years, Mirta Demare has planned fifteen provisional settlements for war refugees and victims of natural catastrophes. In order to heal the marks of so many wars, this pioneer of Latin American activist architecture opened a contemporary art gallery in Rotterdam ten years ago. Demare talks about her theoretical referents and reviews several landmarks of her work, from the organization of cooperatives at the beginning of the 70s in Argentina, to her work around the world with humanitarian aid organizations, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross.

1. THE BIENNIAL AND THE JUNGLE

We have known each other since 2009, when Supersudaca invited you as a guest speaker in the context of an intervention we did in a public space in Haarlem,⁽¹⁾ across the street from the Carlton Square Hotel. The project,⁽²⁾ a camping made of beach tents, questioned refugee and political exile camps, a reality you know very well since you arrived in Holland with that status in 1975. Many things have changed since then, haven't they? Now you have an art gallery. How did you decide to change your life?

I opened a gallery in Rotterdam in 2002. But I would not say I changed my life, although I admit I do feel split. In 2002 I decided to stop working in camps for a while. I was in the second Intifada⁽³⁾ in Jerusalem and that was not fun. I left. I went to Eritrea afterwards and that was also very hard. I was sent to Angola in the project framework of a peace agreement that was going to be signed. There was no agreement, I was between two fires and had to run away

from the country. As soon as I returned to Europe I was sent to Mozambique, where there had been very severe floods. I had never seen so many floating dead bodies. I returned to Holland very tired. My son then told me to stop for a while. I listened to him and decided to pause for a year to do other things. And then I began with the gallery.

Why do you say “split”?

In Holland people cannot do two things at the same time. They always find it difficult to define what I do. Perhaps it is a very Latin American characteristic: we were born in chaos. And it is not just negative, chaos! The survival condition is almost natural in LA. We are very resourceful.

I insist on the “splitting”, I like the concept. Didn’t you stop working in the area of refugee or emergency camps?

Exactly. I just had to stop for a while. The missions had become very dangerous. Many of my colleagues from the ICRC⁽⁴⁾ were murdered. I went to see a psychiatrist in search for advice. I am still going. Not because I am insane; on the contrary, so that I do not become insane. Contact with artists and Buddhism calmed me. Art helps me do introspection and feel more at peace with myself.

Art is a very idealistic world, but at the same time, very hard. I like the company of artists, to talk to them. Above all, those who have a critical view, a social conscience, characteristics shared by the artists of my gallery. But, from time to time, I need to leave this world of art, the vernissages and biennials, to go to the other world, perhaps more real, of the indigenous people, people at war, and negotiations with armed leaders.

Two years ago I was called for a two month mission in a border zone between Honduras and Nicaragua. To go there I had to fly, then eight hours by car and a few more on horseback, because there were no more roads. I was asked if that would be a problem for me. I told them I was practically born on horseback. And I went. Being in that zone almost ten years after my last trip impressed me very much. I am always interested in going back. It is also curiosity. The relationship with nature is very important for me. And the almost telepathic contacts I nearly always have with the natives enrich me considerably. When you live in Holland, as I do, I can swear you need that telepathy!

From the community in Honduras to the Biennial of Art in Lyon, where are you going now? You are a sort of James Bond, from the jungle to the vernissage! Your human quality, your curiosity and adaptability have always interested Supersudaca. In a modest and less risky way, we also like to go into very diverse topics, areas and situations. That curiosity you were talking about. We thought it was very important to talk to you here, about what you have learned and continue to learn. Thanks very much for these stories and good luck with your coming projects.

2. TALKING AROUND THE WORLD

Max Zolkwer: what are the differences between natural catastrophes and wars?

In a natural catastrophe people feel very close together, because everybody is equally affected, it does not matter their position, social class, ideology; there is no enemy. Then, the reaction is

that people are very supportive and they react as a community. The problem of war, on the other hand, is a psychological problem. Not only for the suffering, but because they do not know when it will finish. It is very traumatic. The insecurity of war is a psychological load harder to bear than the effects of an earthquake or any other catastrophe. You can get killed at any moment.

Another important difference is that a natural disaster happens in a very short time. A war lasts years and finally nobody cares. It is the problem of Israel and the Palestine. They have been fighting for over 50 years and it seems that nobody wants to find a solution.

Zolkwer: In that sense, wars are more like endemic poverty in that sense, like “favelas” and “misery villages”.

Yes, of course. That is why what I learned at the favelas was so useful in the refugee camps.

Manuel de Rivero: What can an architect do regarding the favela?

To do orientation, accompanying and consulting. Last year I had a job in El Salvador, in a totally destroyed town. Except for 4000 houses that remained standing, there was nothing else, not even the church. And I helped them to organize themselves. Together we tried to find what they wanted to do. We started to reconstruct the church. We analyzed together what they wanted. People went to Mass and when it was over the priest called a meeting; thus, we began to organize reconstruction. We talked to the people on Sundays and encouraged them to think with their folks what they wanted the house they

would like to have, the house they think about, they begin to think about the distribution, the materials and so on. And it is very interesting because there are people who even bring a model, made of paper or cardboard, it is beautiful. And it is people who cannot even read but who know very well what they want.

Ana Rascovsky: Your trip around the world began in Brazil in 1968. You went to study Brazilian literature. Were you already an architect?

Actually, no, I had almost finished, but I needed to complete some courses. I studied Brazilian literature in Brazil because it was fun. At that moment there was no social project in the Faculty of Architecture. They only did bizarre projects, such as museums, sculptures. When I returned to Argentina, in 1973, I took Design 5 as an intensive summer course. The topic was the farm house in Neuquén,⁽⁵⁾ based on modular structures and self-construction. It was a pilot course; it was done that year and then not any more as there was no time for social projects.

Zolkwer: And what about Brazilian architecture in those years?

Brasilia⁽⁶⁾ was being built. The satellite houses were under construction, which was the social part of architecture. It was very big and beautiful but there were no people. I wondered where all those people who were not ministers or presidents were going to sleep. I began there, and I was given the opportunity to work for two years and do something like a Master's degree.

Zolkwer: Building satellite cities?

Working in the satellite cities and then in Rio, at the university. I had wide knowl-

edge of everything basic, because I had always been more interested in urbanism and planning than in architecture.

De Rivero: What were the references in terms of books and architects?

Ivan Illich,⁽⁷⁾ Paulo Freire,⁽⁸⁾ John Turner,⁽⁹⁾ William Mangin,⁽¹⁰⁾ Gerrit Huizer,⁽¹¹⁾ Oscar Lewis⁽¹²⁾ y Louis Wirth⁽¹³⁾. It was the new theory of breaking up the old cities, opening them and beginning to make many more connections, because the problem from 1955 to 1965 was migration from the countryside to the city. At that time, you could not be in South America or in the third world with closed cities, because our cities not zoned.

De Rivero: How did you get to Khao Dang,⁽¹⁴⁾ your first job...

I left Buenos Aires as a political refugee in November 1975. The military were not there, but there were many people missing. I left with my Dutch husband, Jim Dobson. We were living in Buenos Aires, but we worked in the whole country. I was working in my husband's studio, making infrastructure for the food industry. There we organized workers to form cooperatives. I also worked in the organization of villas miseria in Retiro.

Rascovsky: An architecture study that made buildings for cold storage?

More than anything, an engineering study. It was called Cold Storage Industry Consultants; we designed cold storage chambers, dairy plants and sausage plants. Anyway; everything changed. The Montoneros kidnapped the president of the Philips. We had incidents with the police.

My husband's cousin, who was the Dutch Ambassador in Buenos Aires, was con-

stantly in touch with SIDE –the Argentine Intelligence Service-. He came one day and said – You two are in the black list -. Many people had already disappeared or died in “accidents”. We were building our house. One day they put a bomb that blew out the whole house. According to the newspaper, it had been a gas failure; but we did not even have gas. Then they gave me a passport and took us to Uruguay. And I turned up in Holland.

We arrived in Haarlem, at the house of one of Jim's relatives. Two months later, we rented a house in Bloemendaal⁽¹⁵⁾ a very posh district outside Haarlem, fifteen minutes from Amsterdam. We wondered what we were doing there and what we were going to do for a living. We were receiving help from the government, but did not want to be on holiday forever.

My husband began to work at the Dutch Ministry for Development Cooperation. He was soon sent to Thailand and Tokio. Then he was transferred to Islamabad⁽¹⁶⁾ We went to Thailand for a week intending to visit Phuket⁽¹⁷⁾ and Pattaya,⁽¹⁸⁾ which were paradise at the time because there was not the horrible tourist boom of today. When the problem with the Khmers Rouges⁽¹⁹⁾ started and the Unicef representative in Bangkok⁽²⁰⁾ a Philippine who was a good friend of mine told me that they needed someone to help them with the Cambodian refugee camps in the North of the country. I thought I could help them with a plan or zoning plan before going to Phuket and took the job. I went to the place and stayed working there for four months. I never made it to Phuket in that trip.

De Rivero: How many cities have you built? Was it useful what you had learned at university?

My thesis was about the renovation of the favelas, in Rio de Janeiro. Then I could apply that very well. I have not built cities. I have planned about 15 settlements. I made the plan for Khao Dang, which began to be set up with tents. Almost ten years later, in 1987, the Berlin Forum invited me to give a workshop. It was the International Year of the Homeless. A plan attracted my attention. Yes, it was Khao Dang! What had happened? Khao Dang had been displaced and transformed into a city with 220 thousand inhabitants. The Thai architects and the people of Khao Dang had formalized the infrastructure. Not every urbanist can see his city grow so rapidly. Some 4 or 5, perhaps. Niemeyer,⁽²¹⁾ Lucio Costa,⁽²²⁾ Dioxiadés⁽²³⁾ and a few more.

Rascovsky: What is the procedure in the countries where they call you? How do they call you and who calls you?

I plan and re-plan areas or zones which because of problems of war or catastrophe need to be re-ordered. With that purpose, I am called by several institutions such as the International Red Cross the ICRC or the Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC). They are two different things. The ICRC works on war and the Federation, on natural disasters.

War refugee camps are very different from camps for catastrophe victims, because in these there is a structure and you know what has to be done. In the case of war, you do not know how many people will be displaced, you never know how many people will escape, most of the time the refugees keep coming for months and years. In Syria, during the First Gulf War,⁽²⁴⁾ on the contrary, I visited the whole country, I made maps

of the deserts, to look for a place where to put one hundred thousand Iraqi refugees and then nobody turned up. Not one Iraqi crossed the frontier. Only 100 Bedouins arrived because it was very convenient for them as they were given water, free food for their family and animals.

Rascovsky: What conditions are appropriate for a location to receive a refugee camp?

The first thing is that there must be sufficient water. Besides, there must be natural drainage and slopes, so that it does not flood. Mountains are not good because you need to make terraces and that takes time and money; besides, there are no steamrollers or bulldozers everywhere. There must be shade but it must not be a forest because then people cut all the trees. You cannot put refugees close to the border because they will be invaded. There must be security so that the government can control them, because you cannot have people all over the place either. Finally, many times the governments do not want these camps or these people. The problem is how to convince the governments.

The people are in the valleys, where there is water, and the valleys are generally flooded. Where there are many mountains, the problem is the snow. A place may be perfect in Spring and Summer, but then Winter comes, or it is flooded. The desert is something like that, it never rains, but when it does, rivers are formed in a moment and it is flooded.

The challenge is to supply the camp with the sanitary facilities, because you cannot have an open field toilet for 70.000 people. Water is a big issue. You have to find it, drill and purify it. An English

organization, Oxfam, was the first one to deal with the problem of water. They designed and built special tanks for drinking water. The water must not be close to the toilets. You have to find the underground slope of the aquifer; the aquifer must be in one place and the toilets in another. You cannot put the toilets very far because then people will not use them and everything will be dirty. The toilets are a very big problem at night. They are the only lit places because women are raped constantly. Regardless of the fact that they are Muslims, Christians, whatever, women always pay a high price.

De Rivero: Is security part of the planning?

Yes. Women's toilets have to be installed away from men's. We ask the governments to put guards, but you cannot trust them. Then, instead of guards they send Blue Helmets. Now we see that there are problems⁽²⁵⁾ with them, too. In Zambia, I remember there were many rapes at the beginning until there came some children with whistles. I got the children to tell me where the whistles came from. They were sold by a man. Then, I bought many whistles and gave them to all the women. When one of them began to whistle at night, all the others knew there was a rapist. They ran and chased the man away with shovels and machetes. More than one ended up badly hurt.

Zolkwer: Do you know if there are more who remain in the place or who return? You say that when they have the opportunity to return, they do; but, when do they have the opportunity to return?

Everybody thinks that a refugee camp is temporary. We say that they must not be made temporary; because, in fact, they stay there for many years. In general, in

the settlements or camps I have made, people stay for at least ten years.

When refugees leave, the camp is invaded by local people and that is sometimes a very big problem. There is a lot of competition with the local people because refugees receive an amount of help that the locals do not get. In Khao Dang we realized that the refugees received a much bigger rice ration than the local people. The locals infiltrated queues to get food. We saw that it was a lot better to do a kind of census of the rations the local people received, so as to compensate. Otherwise a great rivalry begins and it may become very dangerous. In the camps of people from Mozambique in Zambia, we ordered that if the hospital carried out vaccination campaigns, these would have to be for the whole population around the camp.

Zolkwer: Eventually, these camps become permanent, for whatever reason, they will always end up developing themselves.

That's right; sometimes they grow at the same pace as the next settlement and end up becoming a town.

Zolkwer: Does your plan always become a kind of town?

In general, yes. Sometimes a small city.

Rascovsky: Going back to the government...

The most difficult thing is to convince them that the people who come have to be under the Geneva Conventions⁽²⁶⁾ that regulate war. To convince them that these people are going to stay a long time. In the 50s, it was thought that the average permanence was about two or three years. At the end of the 80s, there

were people, like those from Mozambique, who were in Zambia and South Africa for over 15 years.

Zolkwer: But that makes a big difference, because you cannot have someone in a tent for 20 years.

No, you cannot. There are changes. The Angolians who were in a camp in Zaire, were eventually given the land. Countries like Zaire, that is huge, have the capacity to do that. Since most of them come from border zones, there is always a family or tribal connection. In some places they begin to adapt themselves or they mix and relate with the locals. But there are other places where it is much more difficult.

De Rivero: But your work is to provide them with a refuge for two years? Are those tents meant to last two years?

Yes and no. Because in the end, nobody wants to make houses for them. People are very resourceful and in general they, themselves, begin to build a house. They keep the tent but begin to make an adobe or stone construction, of any lasting material they can find. The authorities realize that when there is already a town; I saw that in Pakistan, when the Afghans were displaced because of the Soviet invasion in 1978.

Rascovsky: But when people stay, do they begin to work?

Some do, like the Eritreans who spent 30 years of war in Sudan. The Eritreans are very well educated and hard working. Naturally, after 30 years they are organized and do not live in a camp, but in something more like a town. But, when they wanted to repatriate themselves, the Sudanese did not let them. They were the only ones who collected

the crops, if they left, there were no Sudanese to replace them. It was an economic problem.

De Rivero: Are people's wishes the same regarding the "dream house" and the projection? Because in Latin America, when houses begin to consolidate themselves, they are just like the ones in Europe. Houses here are like the houses there and these are like those over there.


People have the idea that a house has to be made of what we call "noble materials". If someone is talking about making an adobe house, which may be big and beautiful, people are reluctant to accept it. In Grenoble,⁽²⁷⁾ France, there is a very good school called Craterre,⁽²⁸⁾ that teaches how to use adobe, earth and clay, but industrially. In Europe there are beautiful buildings with that technology. In Eritrea, for example, the Germans made 3 types of adobe houses. One was square, very much like their own houses, with a corrugated panel roof. The other was a vault and the other a dome. The Germans had a full compound made in Tesseney,⁽²⁹⁾ almost on the border with Sudan, where it is very hot. They had also made an hotel with the domes. They were fantastic and very suitable for hot weather. But nobody wanted a dome house because they were afraid that the roof would fall on them. When the Germans left, the people used the domes for the animals.

When you live in a city, you are more permeable to try new things. Here, in Holland, the peasants do not want the wooden American houses. For them, a house is made of brick.

Rascovsky: *However, those people accept tents.*

The tent is universal. Not everybody wants tents; but, when it is the only thing they have, they accept them. Cold is the worst climate for tents. The first time when tents were not used was in Yugoslavia. Another type of cold and snow resistant refuge had to be built there. They were made of wood. We used pre-fabricated elements which came from Turkey. Some houses to be assembled, which they assembled themselves. Scandinavia also supplied many wooden houses, made of panels.

De Rivero: *Are you optimistic about the future?*

Yes. I was born optimistic. You have to look at history; there have always been wars, there have always been refugees and catastrophes. Between 1995 and 1998; many people were repatriated, which is what everyone wants. The host governments believe that the people are going to stay. That is a myth. But repatriation is a more difficult process than coming in. It takes a lot of preparation and, in general, the governments and the UNHCR expect the country of origin to be safer and more pacific. There are people who leave with what they have because they want to go back to their homeland. 

NOTES

(1) Dutch city located 20 Km from Amsterdam. It produces tulips, beer, chocolate and textiles.
Population: 150.611
Density: 5.035 in habitants/km²
Founded: pre-medieval period.

(2) "When guests become host – welcome camping" (2009), of Supersudaca, called by the curador Danielle van Zuijlen.

(3) Also called Intifada Al-Aqsa (2000-2005). It is estimated that more than five thousand Palestine, one thousand Israeli and 64 foreigners died.

(4) International Red Cross Committee.

(5) Main city of the Argentine Patagonia.
Population: 201.868
Density: 1.734 inhabitants/km²
Founded: 1904

(6) Population 2010: 2.562.963 inhabitants.
Density: 441 inhabitants/km²
Founded: 1960

(7) Austrian philosopher (1926-2002), linked to the environmentalist stream. Founder of CIDOC (Mexico). Author of *The Deschooling Society* (1971).

(8) Brazilian Educator (1921-1997), Author of *Education as a Practice of Freedom* (1967) and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). He worked in Chile for five years.

(9) English architect (London, 1927) who worked in the slum districts of Lima and Arequipa between 1957 and 1965. One of the most influential authors on social housing in developing countries.

(10) North American anthropologist, presumably the first scientist to study informal economics. He worked in Peru in the 1950s and 1960s. Author of "Latin American Squatter Settlements: a problem and a solution" (1967) and author of *Las comunidades aldeanas en la América Latina* (1967).

(11) Dutch social psychologist (1929-1999), author of *The revolutionary potential of the Latin American peasant* (1974). He worked in El Salvador and in Chile.

(12) North American historian and anthropologist (1914-1970) who introduced the study of social poverty. Author of *Anthropology of Poverty* (1959).

(13) North American sociologist born in Germany (1897-1952), leader of the Chicago school of sociology. Author of "Urbanism as a Way of Life" (1938).

(14) A Cambodian refugee camp in Thailand. It reached 160 thousand inhabitants.

(15) Wealthiest Municipality in Holland.

(16) Capital of Pakistan (replaced Karachi).
Planner: Konstantinos Doxiadis
Beginning of construction: 1961
Founding: 1966.
Population: 1.330.000
Density: 880 inhabitants/km²

(17) Biggest island in Thailand and its biggest tourist attraction since the 80s.

(18) Thai commercial and tourist center. A fishing village until the North American army established a leisure base for troops fighting in Vietnam.

(19) Cambodian guerrilla organization led by Pol Pot. He took power in 1975 and founded Democratic Kampuchea, a totalitarian state of Maoist orientation which collapsed in 1979.

(20) Capital of Thailand
Population: 12.000.000 (app.)
Density: 5.258 inhabitants/km²

(21) Oscar Niemeyer (Rio de Janeiro, 1907): Brazilian architect who designed many buildings in Brasilia.

(22) Lucio Costa (1902-1998): Brazilian architect and town planner (born in en Francia) who developed the Pilot Plan for Brasilia.

(23) Konstantinos A. Doxiadis (1913-1975): Greek architect and urbanist who designed from zero the cities of Tema (Gana), Islamabad (Pakistán) and Marsa el Brega (Siria). Leader of the Ekistica movement.

(24) First Gulf War, 1990-1991.

(25) A few days before the interview, the newspapers informed about a network of pedofiles and rapists protected by the Blue Helmets, the peace forcé of the United Nations.

(26) Series of international norms passed in 1864 in order to minimize the effects of war on soldiers and civilians.

(27) Known as the capital of the French Alps.
Population: 156.793
Density: 8.648 inhabitants/km²
Founded: Siglo I

(28) Laboratory of the Higher Education School of Architecture of Grenoble, founded in 1979.

(29) Market city, severely destroyed during the war of Independence of Eritrea.