

FONDATION POUR L'ARCHITECTURE

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# Alter Architecture

## Here, there & differently

Exhibition

23 October 2005 ► 26 March 2006

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# Alter Architecture

## Here, there, differently

On the occasion of the awarding of the Philippe Rothier European Prize for Architecture, the Fondation pour l'Architecture is organising a major exhibition devoted to "alter architecture" around the world. Like alter-globalisation, "alter architecture" envisages a different way of conceiving of the built environment, one that takes into account the constraints linked to modern society as well as the need to protect the environment and the characteristics of the site in which it develops (climate, lifestyle, etc.). In the age of globalisation, it is a question of reflecting on the positioning of architecture in relation to its programme, and on possible alternatives in the face of an increasing uniformity that is ill-suited to the needs of man and of the planet.

The exhibition proposes a trip around the world, discovering architectural cultures of diverse nature. Whether urban or rural, permanent or temporary, created by architects or not, they may differ in form but are essentially the same in substance. They have in common their links to cultural and constructive traditions, respecting their built or natural environment and having recourse to recyclable materials that consume little energy and cause little pollution. Bringing them together in this way serves to highlight these points of convergence that constitute a lesson for the architecture of the future.

This simultaneous presentation of works of past and present and from "here and there" is an invitation to explore the themes of the universality of regionalism and the potential of artisanal construction, in particular through the development of technologies and the dissemination of information.

Through these urban and rural architectures that respect a number of identical codes and that are rooted in the past, the exhibition stresses the importance of building on the lessons and experiences of previous and pre-industrial generations, while also taking into account adaptations to new mentalities and advanced technologies.

The exhibition offers an exceptional collection of pictures gathered together by experts in Europe, China, Asia, North and South America, Africa, Greenland, etc. It explores the various themes in the form of photographic reproductions, plans, models, objects, materials and constructions erected in the exhibition hall itself. It constitutes a non-exhaustive presentation of the architectural constructions illustrated below.

## **The Philippe Rotthier European Prize for Architecture**

For 25 years, the architect Philippe Rotthier searched throughout Europe for new architectures that reflected the spirit of a site, met contemporary demands for comfort and respected the ecology; architectures that mould into the town and landscape without destroying it, that waste neither energy nor space; architectures that establish a dialogue with the past and with history. Philippe Rotthier undertook to pursue this quest through an architecture prize. The works are selected by juries consisting not only of architects but also writers, journalists, artists, art historians and politicians. The preferences invariably go to little known architectures lying outside the small circles of the initiated.

### **Constructions in wood shavings**

Wood shavings are an inevitable by-product of any sawmill and the recycling of this wood waste is a significant component of the timber sector. As wood shavings are often transformed into panels or charcoal, why not use them in constructions? When worked into well-calibrated and solid slabs they resemble bricks, which can be stacked to create very stable walls and corbelled domes, using computing tools as an aid. The surprising results obtained by this architecture and its experimentation, in particular the forester's houses found in Eastern Europe, are described through exceptional documents. A hut made of wood shavings will be created especially for the exhibition.

### **Green architecture in the USA**

Whereas "green architecture" is most often motivated by an "ecological" or aesthetic desire, "living architecture" that uses construction systems that are essentially based on plants and other natural materials represents a genuine economic and social alternative. In the USA, green architecture is integrated in urban development policies and many traditional and vernacular techniques are incorporated in the usual construction methods (glass, wood and vegetal matter). This section of the exhibition shows the practices and applications of contemporary green architecture in the United States.

### **The bamboo structures of Simon Velez in Colombia**

Bamboo is a giant member of the grasses family. Its hollow morphology and regular knots render it more resistant than steel, relatively non-flammable and supple, light and flexible. It resists solvency in water better than wood, does not rust, is waterproof and rotproof and needs no working. A natural resource available in inexhaustible quantities, and resistant to earthquake, bamboo is nevertheless being replaced by concrete and bricks, especially in South America. The famous Colombian architect Simon Velez combines Colombian tradition and structural design, ecology and the most avant-garde technology in his use of this material.

## **The flexible vegetal structures of Marcel Kalberer (Germany)**

It was his interest in one of the most ancient construction systems in the world, that of the plaited reeds used 5000 years ago by the Mesopotamians to build their homes, that gave Marcel Kalberer the idea of producing, from 1984, flexible vegetal structures using branches of willow planted in the ground. By bending and assembling them he invented natural, living and evolving shelters in the form of tunnels, domes, pavilions, palaces or cathedrals. To produce these hybrid constructions the architect used schoolchildren and other volunteers from various European countries with sometimes as many as 600 working on a single site. The modern-day follies of Marcel Kalberer erected in parks on the occasion of commemorative events have rapidly become very popular tourist attractions.

## **The badgirs (wind towers) of Iran**

The badgir, which literally means “wind catcher”, is a traditional structure used to provide passive air conditioning for buildings by circulating the prevailing wind from the rooftops to the living areas as a means of ventilating and cooling them. These decorated chimneys that are found throughout the Middle East can be made of brick, earth or limestone. Currently facing competition from commercial air-conditioners, these passive and efficient devices deserve to be studied not only as a bio-climatic solution but much more comprehensively in the context of landscape, form, use, construction, maintenance, utility and heritage.

## **André Ravéreau and the fascination with an aesthetic (Algeria)**

In 1949, the French architect André Ravéreau, who was working in Algiers, travelled to Ghardaïa, in the M'Zab Valley (Algeria), where he set about studying the architecture of a town whose aesthetics immediately fascinated and charmed him. The inhabitants of the M'Zab are known as Ibadites, an offshoot of the Muslim community who settled in this practically virgin valley in around the 11th century and who managed to apply the demands of a religion, a philosophy and a social life to the conception of a human space and its built domain for a period of 1,000 years. Their architecture shows an exceptional purity of conception, escaping formalisms and perfectly adapted to the climate. André Ravéreau saw in the M'Zab both the rigour of Perret and the exciting forms found in Le Corbusier, whose constructions were marked by the lessons of the M'Zab.

## **The “mortar shell” hut, history and reconstruction (Cameroon & Chad)**

The “mortar shell” hut is an earth and grass construction found in North Cameroon and Chad and inhabited by the Musgums, a population of fishermen and pony breeders. Built on a circular plan and superposing successive bases to create structures that can be as much as 15 to 20 metres high, these huts were genuine colonial curiosities. The association Patrimoine sans frontières, responsible for preserving traditional Musgum architecture, launched a training site that resulted in the construction of a complete development of five of these “mortar shell” huts, thanks to a rediscovery of local know-how.

## The house-village of Tell Beydar (Syria)

Built by André Stevens (Belgium) and Mohamad Garad (Syria), the Tell Beydar house-village is designed to accommodate an archaeological mission of about 50 members. It is built on a section of the former circular perimeter wall of the town of Nabda (2,400 BC), using the traditional technique of green brick made of earth mixed with water and chopped straw. The walls are 50-75 centimetres thick and the roofs are sugarloaf domes or constructed with logs of *populus euphratica* surmounted with boards, a straw bed and a waterproof finish in beaten down earth. To limit the use of wood, the architects used the corbelled arch as already used 5000 years ago. This architectural variation on Arab and Mesopotamian themes is both an agreeable residence and an exceptional training site.

## The haciendas of the Andes (Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia)

Part of the Andes cordillera, the Ecuadorian Andes surround and protect a long series of small basins. A dream décor for the siting of haciendas, the large rural estates which are the fruit of the Hispanic and evangelist influence on the lands conquered in the XVIth century by the conquistadors. The common characteristics of the haciendas are the presence of one or more metalled patios around which the various building elements are erected, with a gallery running round the exterior that protects the occupants from the rain and sun, the presence of a chapel and a granary as a separate building. Despite a number of private initiatives that permitted their restoration, many of these constructions have been abandoned in this region. Attracting attention to this little known patrimony of fascinating 'ecological' architecture can only encourage its promotion as a feature of the architectural patrimony and landscape, both nationally and universally.

## The Hakka dwellings in China

The Younding district of Fujian Province (southeast China) is home to the Hakka, an ethnic group whose language, customs and even dietary habits differ from the rest of the Chinese population. Their architecture is akin to genuine "earthen social housing" rising to a height of 20 metres and quadrangular or circular in shape. A whole clan, that is sometimes as many as 400 people, live in just one of these buildings, entirely turned in upon itself for safety reasons but open to all the neighbours whether opposite or adjacent. As all forms of popular architecture in China, these dwellings were denigrated during the Maoist period when the focus was on solid buildings as symbols of modernism and progress. Nevertheless, local populations are continuing to build in the same style and continuing to use the technique of the adobe, even if today the buildings are no longer of such phenomenal dimensions.

## List of exhibition sections

- A selection of works created by recipients of the 2004 grants from the Fondation Electricité de France :
  - The forester's houses of Eastern Europe and contemporary construction experiences working with wood shavings from sawmills.
  - Green or living architecture, in the USA
  - The bamboo architecture of Simon Velez in Colombia;
  - The wind towers of Iran
- A selection of creations in Europe that respect the needs of durability, respect for the environment, energy savings, recycling, and urban and rural integration. They are all winners of the Philippe Rotthier Triennial European Prize for Architecture.
- The community housing of the Hakka of Fujian and the Guangdong in China
- The constructions and projects of the M'Zab workshop by André Ravéreau, in Algeria
- The Arabian Peninsular in Dubai (wind towers), the port towns of the Gulf of Oman, Muscat on the maritime Silk Road, Sour (former slave port), Sohar (shipyards for dhow construction), the town of Zabid in Yemen, and contemporary examples of the vernacular renewal.
- Villages on the northwest coast of Greenland, in particular Ummannaq
- Kurdish villages in Syria, north of Alep and the house-village of Tell Beydar
- The Indian village of Taos and present constructions in the region, inspired by traditional forms and techniques.
- The haciendas of the Andes
- The mortar shell huts of the Musgums, in North Cameroon and Chad

# Fondation pour l'Architecture

(CIVA)

Exhibition

**23 October 2005 to 26 March 2006**

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