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# The Backdrop Architecture

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*KEYWORDS. Community, fabric, continuity, commitment*

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**Silvia Alonso \_ Armando Sempere**

*Architecture workshop  
Cirilo Amorós St 90 Valencia 46004, Spain / silviaalonso@arquired.es  
960 030 820 - 677 778 031- 678 423 733*

## 1. Main text

There are a number of architectural firms working in London today that committed to the an understanding of the city as a collective project for which we are all responsible. This article explores some projects of urban intervention by Florian Beigel, Tony Fretton, Caruso St John and Sergison Bates, in order bring us nearer to this way of thinking.

Post-war England promoted the emergence of intellectual groups like XX Century or the Independent Group, which aimed to change society through art. Social science and interest in the real world, led the artists to work combining the existing so as to generate new things. Amongst these artists were Nigel Henderson, who influenced the group through his photograph scenes of peripheral working-class neighbourhoods, and Alison and Peter Smithson, who presented the strategy As Found in architecture as a creative medium. This strategy refers to the truth of reality, at present, the ordinary and meticulous observation of everyday life, in order to trace the footsteps of what exists and use it as a basis for new forms.



Fig. 1

In Architecture the concerns of these groups crystallized in the CIAM X in Dubrovnik 1956 and later with Team X, which met in 1977. Interest in the humanities was a key attitude proposed by the Team X for approaching architecture.

De-industrialization in England was very abrupt. Because of the form of capitalism that the country developed under the government of Margaret Thatcher, many of the industrial cities were no longer attractive because the factories moved to cheaper countries. This policy left public architecture in the hands of large corporations whose only aim was profitability.

In the 80's Florian Beigel was an example for the students of London Metropolitan University, on the political commitment that an architect should assume. Some of his students, as Adam Caruso and Peter St John, began meeting in 90's with other

young architects around the figure of Tony Fretton, another architect engaged and established in the same way as Beigel. They are linked by a grim picture and a great sense of responsibility of architecture to society. This group was sometimes called Group Sugden, due to their meeting in the house built by Smithsons in 1956. The Smithsons were an essential reference for all of them. The group appreciated the emotion, memory and the presence of the architecture of all time.

The Backdrop Architecture is the way Caruso St John explain the role reversal between subject and object. While most fashionable architecture focuses on the object, other architects such as our English group, focus on the subject. Architecture is the backdrop against which life happens, that is really important and gives meaning to everything else. The real world is an inexhaustible source of creativity. These architects say they always work with things they had seen before somewhere, somehow, working from their memory of the world. As had the Smithsons, they proclaimed the value of the ordinary as opposed to the spectacular, whose main value is the ability to surprise.

With this approach, their architecture explains the site, it helps citizens to understand it better, through memory, through family associations and their relationship with tradition. The continuity of architecture throughout history, for these architects, is a fact enriching that base their work.

*Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity<sup>1</sup>.*

This architecture promotes the idea of community, enabling us to live in society, because it underscores our common past bonds. Tony Fretton emphasizes the idea that we all work in a Collective Unconscious Project that strengthens the values of community life. This architecture is an Architecture for Tolerance, as explained by Sergison Bates, it is not imposed, but proposed as a means to give continuity to the fragmented city.

The main strategy that they work is the observation, the careful look to the place to internalize their layers of meaning. Fretton and Beigel give prominence to the observation process. The project's success depends on being able to extract from the place the keys that it encloses, and being able to understand it deeply. The result makes comments and sometimes intervenes through proposals that bring to light some of these strata.

The emptiness potential is the following strategy to Beigel. The purpose of architecture is to create emptiness, don't fill the world of objects, but at most replaces them. The emptiness allows the specified uncertainty in architecture. The use is indeterminate because the emptiness allows the appropriation of space for

people, as in the projects we will discuss below. The specificity comes from the materiality of the work, that is rooted to a place and a moment in world history.

Fragmentation in architecture, as Fretton explains, allows the urban interventions to be more accessible to people. From the outside the buildings allow them to understand the different spaces that form, giving an idea of what can happen inside. From inside the chain of spaces of different scales and atmospheres allow people internalize, identify each area compared to others. The variability in this sense acts as variations in historic towns, the routes are rich in various meanings that can lead to the discovery at any time.

The collage on the other hand is a compositional technique in which anything can be or removed at any time. According to Beigel, a collage sets up free and unexpected associations between phenomena, which multiply meanings. Each element maintains its value over the whole and about itself, but the objects are valued together. In architecture this technique gives a flexibility of space and use that these architects have intended to incorporate into their works.

The Half Moon Theatre is a project by Florian Beigel and ARU realized in 1985, located in the Mile End Road in East London. The project was the opportunity to experiment with the typology, looking for references in the Italian Commedia del Arte, and the Elizabethan theatres with galleried courtyards, such as Shakespeare's Globe Theatre. The architects also studied theatre in the street or market square, where people interact freely with actors. The project seeks to make room, either to the relationship between people around the buildings, either in the scenic road, which is the covered street where stage and auditorium are one space free to use. The traditional typology that swept London in the eighteenth century was directional and gradually optimized more and more space, until the twentieth century was again raised the idea of mitigating the rigidity of this scheme. According to Walter Segal<sup>2</sup>, Florian Beigel's theatre is that which went furthest in this direction, until the mid 80's the government of M. Thatcher stopped giving grants to theatre companies and they had to sell the building, which has since become a pub.



Fig. 2

This project calls into question the alignments of the modern city, dealing with the conflicts of the real plot. This reflection is materialized in the cutting of the pavement, which arises from the geometry of the garden pavilion and is carried through space all the way to the very limit of the roadway. Also question the urban morphology generated by the elements window, street or façade, facing regarding the real use behind these elements. This point is visible for example through simulated windows corresponding to the typology of the street and the real ones that are integrated so as to disappear visually.

The set is developed through the progression space between the street and the old cemetery to the north. It incorporates the Edwardian chapel adjoining to the west as foyer and the pavilion in the garden as a Young People's Theatre. Access is down from Mile End directly to open public courtyard, which accesses the covered street. The unity of yard and street are achieved through the side galleries that are continuous and the unity of the materials. The scenic road is covered by an industrial-looking metal enclosure that continues vertically forming fronts of the building.

The two Lisson galleries were made by Tony Fretton in 1986 and 1992, in a working class neighborhood on the periphery of London. The second exhibition space is acquired by successive purchases of small plots. The area was occupied by eighteenth-century shops with living rooms above.

The main gallery is the second to be built and through which the building is usually accessed. This exhibition seeks continuity with adjoining buildings of the XVIII, acquiring the air of a commercial building of the Industrial Age. The rear view

features extensive cityscape and the gallery is also related to the office tower and adjacent school. This awareness of the environment allows this small building dialogue with the urban space to which it relates.

The two projects are linked by a point at the bottom of each plot and incorporate the confused and disordered configuration of the plot adjoining parcel to which they belong. The main theme in this project is the room-street as public modern space. His visual relationship with the street is the most significant in this regard. The difference in elevation places the ground floor of the main gallery about 80cm below the street, so that everything that happens in the street is as arranged on a display table, thanks to complete glazing of the facade at this level.

Faced with this gallery stands the school yard. This creates a vacuum in front of the building that incorporates the sky as a neutral background. The street on which it stands is occupied periodically by a market and people going to school. The street has a lot of life and pedestrians circulate endlessly in front of the gallery. This enhances the meeting of real-life and reflected in art, between dynamic of life and permanent architecture.



Fig. 3

The square of Stortorget was a project realized in 2003 by Caruso St John, in the city of Kalmar, Sweden. The square measures 90x110m and is the main public space of a small town southwest of Sweden. The baroque cathedral stands in

isolation in the middle of the square, which is bounded by traditional buildings. The architects rethought what should be a contemporary public space in a place that has now returned to the city center. The square is a meeting place where the original emptiness is restored allowing the reading of environment history through the material realization of the project.



Fig. 4

The stones with which the square is paved are great, raw, uncut and brought from the fields, first to raise the dry stone walls around the perimeter of the city and later to build the walls of houses and to pave the streets and squares. These stones have formed most of the paving of Stortorget for 300 years. The variability in size, color and texture, clearly distinguishable from the homogeneous slabs and granite curbs added to the square 80 years ago, to differentiate circulation and pedestrian areas. The aggregates used in the different floors also come from the local stone.

The square is a continuous plane offset by a mosaic of textures in the rocky floor. The other two planes that are set aside are the sky bounded by the historic buildings that confine by day and the red-lit points on poles and roofs that cover it by night. In the pavement are round metal vents through which we can hear the water flowing under the pavement, through underground channels to the sea, reminding of their vicinity.

The Pub Walsall was the first project of Sergison Bates in 1998, in the town of Walsall in the UK. The industrial past of the city is its most significant feature and is still at the scene. The implementation of the building in a residential place is the opportunity to regenerate the west end of Main Street, ending with the Walsall Art Gallery by Caruso St John shortly. The building is a small-scale piece that generates



a free volume, that responds to the environment by using common materials such as brick, wood and tile, homogeneous staining.



Fig. 5

Each façade of the building responds with a different scale to the square, channel or street, without symmetry or hierarchy. The interior seeks a mood through the use of the material and family associations in the minds of people, connected emotionally with this type of facility in the area.

In countries where the dominant capitalism means architecture is only an object at the services fashion and entertainment, these architects form a resistance.

**Silvia Alonso** is an architect graduated in the Alicante School of Architecture in 2003. She did a Master about residential architecture and institutional buildings in the Polytechnic University of Madrid in 2010, and now she is working in her PhD at the same university.

**Armando Sempere** is an architect graduated in the Valencia School of Architecture in 1990.

They share the practice since 2005 and their work covers participation in public competitions and investigation in the realm of the project.



## 2. Notes

<sup>1</sup> CARUSO, 2008. 11. Adam Caruso introduces his article Cover Versions by this text: ELIOT, Thomas Stearns. *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, in *The Egoist*, 1919.

<sup>2</sup> SEGAL, 1985. 14.

## 3. Legends

(Fig.1) Photograph, by Nigel Henderson

(Fig.2) Half Moon Theatre, by Florian Beigel

(Fig.3) Lisson Gallery, by Tony Fretton

(Fig.4) Stortorget, by Caruso St. John

(Fig.5) Pub Walsall, by Sergison Bates.

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