

The Château de Monte Cristo

A celebration of life by Alexandre Dumas

Alejandro Dumas

literatura

condensador de experiencias

ritmo vital

Alexandre Dumas

literature

experience condenser

rhythm of life

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Alejandro Dumas, en el apogeo de su fama y poseedor de una gran fortuna obtenida gracias al creciente éxito de sus escritos, quiere construir la casa de sus sueños en un idílico terreno, en las afueras de París. El resultado es un lugar que refleja su forma de vivir: extravagante y excesiva.

Se trata de una folie compuesta por dos edificios, con evocadores nombres: el castillo de Montecristo y el castillo de If. El primero es un palacete renacentista, en el que vive junto a su familia, amigos y amantes, en el que organiza suntuosas fiestas para todo tipo de invitados. El segundo es un pequeño pabellón gótico dedicado al trabajo, en donde se encierra doce horas al día para escribir una de las obras literarias más extensas que se conocen. Ambos responden a dos facetas que encuentran una equilibrada relación de reciprocidad en la personalidad de Dumas: la del vividor y la del trabajador infatigable.

La arquitectura del castillo de Montecristo está íntimamente ligada a la visión de la realidad aportada por la literatura. El espacio es pensado para intensificar las experiencias que se desarrollan en él y aportar así la materia que necesita Dumas para dar vida a sus personajes y crear su ilimitado universo literario.

En una época marcada por las restricciones ligadas a la pandemia de COVID-19, el desarrollo de este tipo de arquitecturas permitiría a sus usuarios modificar su ritmo vital, para recuperar el tiempo de ocio e interacción social perdido durante periodos de intenso trabajo. Crear una pauta que facilite la realización personal de cada usuario, recordando el motivo que impulsó la creación del castillo de Montecristo: una celebración de la vida.

In his heyday, while benefiting of a large fortune acquired from the growing success of his writings, Alexandre Dumas wanted to build the house of his dreams on an idyllic plot of land on the outskirts of Paris. The result was a place that reflected his way of life, which was extravagant and excessive.

It was a folie made up of two buildings with evocative names: the Château de Monte Cristo and the Château d'If. The first was a Renaissance mansion, where he lived with his family, friends and lovers, and where he organised sumptuous parties for all kinds of guests. The second one was a small Gothic pavilion dedicated to work, where he used to lock himself away for twelve hours a day to write one of the most extensive literary works known to mankind. Both of them were two facets of Dumas's personality and found a balanced relationship of reciprocity: that of the vivid and that of the indefatigable worker.

The architecture of the Château de Monte Cristo is intimately linked to the vision of reality provided by literature. The space is designed to intensify the experiences that take place in it and thus provide the material Dumas needs to bring his characters to life and create his limitless literary universe.

At a time characterised by the restrictions linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, the development of this type of architecture would allow its users to modify their rhythm of life, to recover the time for leisure and social interaction lost during periods of intense work and to create a pattern that facilitates the personal fulfilment of each user, recalling the motive behind the creation of the Château de Monte Cristo: a celebration of life.

“We can only combat extreme worry with extreme insouciance”¹

In most cases, a delirium of grandeur remains a mere anecdote, an extravagant idea for a coffee-break. Only a few people go further than that, because they have enough money to turn any wish into reality and, above all, because they have the audacity to overcome any obstacle. Alexandre Dumas brought both qualities together to create what Balzac described as “one of the most delicious folies ever made”².

The so-called Château de Monte Cristo, where he lived for four years, is a true monument to literature, one of those rare buildings that seem to come from another world, from the extraordinary mind of one of the most significant authors of the 19th century.

To understand the genesis of the house, it is necessary to understand the way Dumas lived. In 1844, he led an existence characterised by extravagance and excess. He lived surrounded by a large troupe, as if in a commune, in a manner reminiscent of Charles Fourier’s phalansteries and, above all, the abbey of Thelema. Claude Schopp explains that “each of Alexander’s residences is like an abbey of Thelema and a phalanstery. Pleasure and work mixed together without any clear organisation”³. The abbey of Thelema was the first utopia in French literature, which Rabelais described as an anti-abbey in which its inhabitants, unlike the monks, lived in freedom and opulence⁴. The name Thelema, from the Greek θέλημα, designates the divine will or an aspect of the human will when it appears without reflection. It is not a synonym for caprice, but a manifesto of one’s personal truth.

In the case of Dumas, his personal truth was marked by his jovial character, his generosity, his desire to live well (he was a bon vivant, as they say in French) and his confidence in himself and in achieving whatever he set his mind to. Nestor Roqueplan⁵ said about Dumas: “the joy, the carefree, the illusion, the wit, the incoherence, the irrationality of this boy, his health and his fertility are

phenomenal”⁶. All these qualities gave rise to a magnetic personality that attracted a great cluster of people, including certain parasites who wanted to take advantage of the author’s inexhaustible energy. His closest circle included his son, Alexandre, his ever-changing lovers, his friends, his personal secretary and his trusted domestics: the Italian butler Rusconi, the gardener Michel, the cook Mrs Lamarque and the famous black Alexis⁷. In 1844, they all lived in the villa Médicis, which Dumas rented in rue Boulingrin in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, only twenty kilometres west of Paris. This was where he used to retire to write. He also had a flat in the rue de la Chaussée d’Antin in the capital, close to newspapers, publishers and theatres, enabling him to participate in the effervescence of the city of light.

THE STORY OF MONTE CRISTO

An atypical mansion for an unequalled writer

Dumas’ existence was divided between two facets: the one of the vivid man who wanted to enjoy every moment of what the world had to offer and that of the tireless worker, capable of writing for twelve hours a day, giving rise to one of the most extensive bodies of literary works known (some six hundred titles are attributed to him⁸). Although they may seem antagonistic, both characters coexisted in him naturally, succeeding each other without an established rhythm, complementing each other. From this reciprocity might have arose the infinite energy that seemed to constantly drive the popular writer. On the one hand, at the Villa Médicis, his hedonistic thirst was quenched by a large garden in which open-air plays were performed and where there was a stable, a henhouse, a monkey palace and a greenhouse with all kinds of flowers. And on the other hand, his need to work found the ideal place in a small pavilion with stained glass windows, isolated from the main house.⁹

But that was not enough for the great Dumas, who was writing “The Count of Monte Cristo” and “The Three Musketeers”. The enormous success that he would achieve with these two serials

would allow him to realise the dream that was taking shape in his head. In the summer of 1844, he fell in love with a nearby plot of land overlooking the Seine in Port-Marly and he bought no less than fourteen plots of land and called in the architect Hippolyte-Louis Durand (1801-1882).

The project

- *Mr Durand, you are going to design me an English garden in the middle of which I want a Renaissance castle, in front of a Gothic pavilion surrounded by water... There are streams which you will turn into waterfalls.*

- *But Mr Dumas, replied the architect, the floor is made of mud, nothing will hold there!*

- *You will dig until you find good ground and make two levels of basements.*

- *That will cost you hundreds of thousands of francs.*

- *I hope so!*¹⁰

Durand budgeted the work at 50,000 francs, but Dumas ended up paying 300,000 francs¹¹. Underground water passages had to be diverted and a huge foundation and retaining walls had to be dug. On 24th July 1844, Dumas gave a symbolic inauguration party on the building site of the château, which the actor Mélingue and his wife named Monte Cristo. “I will see you here again in three years”, Dumas told his guests.¹²

That was an intense time for him. He followed the work closely, complaining that Barthélémy Planté’s masons were not progressing as fast as he would have liked¹³. As if that was not enough, he embarked on another adventure where he bought the former Hôtel Foulon, on the boulevard du Temple in Paris, to build his own theatre, the Théâtre Historique, in 1846.

He entrusted this project to the architect Pierre-Anne de Dreux (1788-1849) and to the painter and stage designer Charles Séchan (1803-1874). De Dreux followed Dumas’ instructions to compose the façade, which gave a hint of what would become the Château de Monte Cristo and of which Dumas was particularly proud of:

It will summarise in stone my immutable thought. The building is based on antiquity, tragedy and comedy, that is to say, on Aeschylus and Aristophanes. These two ancient geniuses will support Shakespeare, Corneille, Molière, Racine, Calderon, Goethe and Schiller. Ophelia and Hamlet, Faust and Marguerite, represent the Christian art in the centre of the façade, while the two lower caryatids represent the art of antiquity. And the genius of the human mind points heaven to man¹⁴.

While the theatre opened its doors on 19th February 1847 to great acclaim from the public, the work was hectic in Port-Marly to finish the interiors of the château. Dumas had returned from a long trip to Algeria where he had been commissioned by the state to write about the French colony with the aim of making

it popular. Accompanied by a part of his troupe, on his journey he passed through Spain and Tunisia and imagined a new folly. He wanted an Arab salon in his castle, like the ones that impressed him so much in the Alhambra of Granada, in the Alcázar of Seville or in the palace of the Bey of Tunis¹⁵. There, the Bey's personal sculptor was working on the Bey's tomb, but Dumas, as self-confident as usual, did not hesitate to take him to France. To convince the Bey, he said to him: "You have commissioned your tomb to him, I want to commission a salon to him. Your salon will be inhabited after your death and you are the one in the least hurry, so it is up to you to give me your turn"¹⁶. Dumas thus staged the pretensions that guided the construction of his palace, which is conceived as a tribute to life and earthly pleasures. It is a victory over death.

The materialised dream

On 25th July 1847, everything was ready for the opening party, the day after Alexandre Dumas' forty-fifth birthday, which honoured the extravagant promise made three years earlier. Six hundred guests were present, and Dumas strolled among the tables laid out on the grass. Beaming, he wore decorations, medals, and a heavy gold chain, which hung from his waistcoat. He kissed the women, shook hands with the men and told stories¹⁷. His dream had come true. He went so far as to say: "Here I have a reduction of paradise on earth"¹⁸. On this event, André Marois would note that "He had never been so happy"¹⁹.

Guests discovered the appearance of a monumental folly, a reflection of the excess in which Dumas lived. The



Fig. 1 – Monte Cristo south façade.

square floor plan of the building, which has a basement and three storeys, was dominated by two towers, which housed the staircases and flank the entrance (Fig. 1). The architect, Hippolyte-Louis Durand, who received very precise instructions from Dumas, reproduced the windows of the Château d'Anet, whose sculptors, Germain Pilon and Jean Goujon, are among the leading names of the French Renaissance. Above each window on the ground floor is a medallion supported by two salamanders, one on each side, which was the arms given by King François I to Villers-Cotterets, from Dumas' hometown. Each medallion bears the faces and names of literary figures, who marked the era in which they lived: Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Virgil, Plautus, Terence, Dante, Shakespeare, Lope de Vega, Corneille, Racine, Molière, Goethe, Schiller, Walter Scott, Byron and Victor Hugo. Dumas himself reserved the medallion on the main door, presided over with his motto: "I love those who love me"²⁰ (Fig. 2). Floral motifs and imaginary animals complete the sculptures that adorn the façades. And his initials, AD, are visible in front of the domes crowning the towers.

Inside, everything had been taken care of down to the smallest detail, with small but well laid out rooms. In the basement were the kitchens. On the ground floor there was a dining room with sculpted woodwork (Fig.3), a waiting room and an intimate reception room with real cashmere curtains²¹, where Dumas displayed his collection of weapons (rifles, carbines, Arab pistols, swords, sabres, daggers, knives, etc.)²². Each stained-glass window had drawings evoking different activities or earthly pleasures, with a theme in each room: musical instruments, board games, food, etc. On the upper floors the decoration was exuberant, with Persian, Gothic, Renaissance, Henri II and Louis XV style salons, filled with luxurious tapestries, furniture (gondola chairs, ebony wood gaming tables, marquetry desks), paintings (Delacroix, Decamps, Bonhommé) and sculptures (Auguste Prévault, James Pradier, Antonin Moine), which left the guests speechless. The Arab salon stood out, with its ceilings



Fig. 2 – Monte Cristo north façade and details of south façade.



Fig. 3 – The dining room



Fig. 4 – The Arab salon



Fig. 5 - The island pavilion, the garden and the Arab salon

and walls which were decorated with arabesques by the sculptor of the Bey of Tunis, Hadj Youmis, and his son, Mohammed, who agreed not to do any other such similar in France²³(Fig. 4).

Opposite the château, Dumas used to work in a small house, named Château d'If, elevated by the topography of the land. It was completely surrounded by water, with a stone bridge as its only access, just like the fortification of Marseilles (Fig. 5). This was the method used by Dumas to keep the people away and to isolate himself for writing. His aim was to let his guests enjoy the château and the garden, while he slipped away at any time to work, as one never knew when inspiration might strike. The building was even more atypical than the château, as its function offered much more freedom to the architect. Dumas wanted a Gothic pavilion, a theatrical replica of the one he already had at the villa Médicis, with a single room, but the result was one of those idyllic houses that came straight from a fairy tale (Fig. 6). It had two storeys, a volume with an exposed wooden structure, which housed the staircase leading to the first floor, and a kind of tower, which jut out from the main body and allowed Dumas to view the whole of his property. The façades were enlivened by pointed windows, fine columns and sculptures of characters from his novels, as well as the names of 88 works from his fertile pen, carved into the stone. These titles greeted him every day, when he came to isolate himself to write at the table in front of the large window - with a direct view of the Château de Monte Cristo - which was located near a monumental stone fireplace, under a ceiling painted blue and dotted with stars.

In addition to the two houses, the plot has a number of buildings for Dumas' domestics and his many animals: three horses (Athos, Porthos and Aramis), five dogs, three monkeys, two parrots, the cat Mysouf, a golden pheasant named Lucullus, a cock named César and the vulture Jugurtha, brought from Tunisia, at the same time as the Bey's sculptor.²⁴

The entire grounds were transformed into a lush English style garden. The winding topography facilitated the creation

of meandering paths, streams, waterfalls and ponds, fed by existing streams. In addition, artificial stones and caves were formed, new features that enlivened the ensemble, conducive to bucolic strolls (Fig. 7).

The entertainments

As a result of his generous character, Dumas opened the doors of his folly to everyone. The guests were more numerous than at the Villa Médicis and the host did not know them all. His personality

revitalised the quiet village of Saint-Germain-en-Laye, where the train arrived from the capital, filling it with curious onlookers who came in the hope of seeing the popular writer. The party went on, day and night, along with adventures with the actresses who performed his texts at the



Fig. 6 – The Château d'If pavilion

Théâtre Historique. The food and drinks were excellent and reflected the well-known gourmet side of the writer, who enlivened the after-dinner conversation with his eloquence and good humour. It was a real pleasure for the senses. The entertainment became increasingly diversified, especially after the arrival of a hypnotist on 5th September 1847. His show took place in the Persian room, where he was observed while blindfolded, being able to play cards, read a closed book and even predict the death of Paul Eau-de-Benjoin from typhoid fever. Even if the death prediction was one day inaccurate, it convinced Dumas, who became a great believer and even a disciple. In early October 1847, Dumas himself managed to hypnotise and put to sleep Alexis, his faithful servant, who collapsed on a sofa and astonished his twelve guests²⁵. The writer took seriously what had begun as an amusement and wanted to demonstrate “the immortality of the soul”. A new kind of celebration of life took place in Monte Cristo, but Dumas wanted to achieve immortality in another way and began to write his memoirs, on his private island of the Château d’If, on 18th October 1847.²⁶

The last time

Although the expense was inordinate, as can be imagined, money was not an issue. Everything in Dumas’ life was excessive: not only his fortune, but also his talent and his unflappable determination; he was capable of anything, to the astonishment of his incredulous contemporaries. To pay for his extravagances, Dumas did not stop writing (plays, serials, novels...), with the invaluable help of Auguste Maquet. Moreover, he made use of the enormous success of the Count of Monte Cristo and the Théâtre Historique. He was not one to stop to reap what he had already sown: he always wanted more and continued to play a game he mastered like no one else, taking advantage of his growing popularity. But the success of the Théâtre Historique was short-lived (the Revolution of 1848 did not help) which did not allow Dumas to maintain his way of life or to continue generously pleasing his friends, lovers, servants and animals. Despite working tirelessly, he was forced to sell the Monte Cristo furniture to Jacques Doyen on 25th January 1848²⁸. However, this was not enough to keep his buyers away and he ended up selling his entire property to

Doyen on 22th March 1849²⁸ for a mere thirty thousand francs, to help in paying off his astronomical debts. Nevertheless, he stayed in the château until his final departure to Brussels, on 10th December 1851²⁹. Dumas never returned to Monte Cristo and his son and friends were the only ones who stayed there occasionally.

The place changed ownership several times and gradually lost its magnificence. When the English writer Edith Saunders (author of *The Lady of the Camellias* and *the Dumas*) entered the house, some one hundred years after it was built, she said: “It was empty when I visited it, and yet I could not distinguish the desolation that hangs over old, deserted houses. There was a warm and welcoming atmosphere, as if it still bore the imprint of the man who created it according to his personal tastes. Fortunately, its successive owners did not transform it during its century of existence”.³⁰

Saving Monte Cristo

The atypical configuration of Monte Cristo ended up condemning the site to oblivion and destruction. In 1969, a real-estate operation planned to demolish the château in order to build several



Fig. 7 – The English garden

residential buildings. Fortunately, in 1971, the Association of Alexandre Dumas' Friends was created. It alerted public opinion and succeeded in having the building permit refused. The generosity that Dumas showed during his lifetime was eventually repaid by a group of friends whom he never met in person, but who would have loved to share a table and a conversation with the brilliant writer. The towns of Marly-le-Roi, Pecq-sur-Seine and Port-Marly bought the property and saved it for good. The place was declared a historical monument in 1975, restored (the King of Morocco himself, Hassan II, contributed by offering the restoration of the Arab salon) and opened to the public in 1994, converted into a museum of Alexandre Dumas's life. Today, various activities are organised to bring life to the place and turn it into much more than a museum such as temporary exhibitions, dramatised visits, concerts, murder parties (to find the person responsible for a murder that took place during one of Dumas' parties), an "escape game", a literary salon for young people and various

activities for children, complete a varied offer that aims to restore the soul of this unique building.

ARCHITECTURE AND LITERATURE

Redefining limits

The story of the Château de Monte Cristo teaches us the importance of maintaining a belief, which, however extravagant it may seem, makes sense in the mind of the person who conceives it. Visiting this earthly paradise shows us that the only limits that exist are those we impose on ourselves. Dumas did not have them, and perhaps he would have needed some to make Monte Cristo's dream last longer.

In any case, the existence of limits, located far away from the ordinary ones, creates the playing field on which all folly appears. The freedom to choose any path, regardless of external impositions, is the necessary starting point.

Folly as a pleasure

We might name Dumas' attitude as "folly", as well as his perseverance to obtain something that seems impossible. Even when the external conditions were against him, he carried on his extravagant dream which was to create a garden and two buildings, conceived to please him. The pleasure issued from social interaction and from any kind of amusement is the starting point of the Château de Monte Cristo, but also the mainstay of the "folly" definition. We find in this mansion a tangible optimism that we can use to encourage the development of any type of architecture sustained by the same principle. If Monte Cristo was based on collective pleasure, as Dumas liked to do in pleasing others with extravagant parties, the Château d'If pavilion was also based on individual pleasure, as Dumas enjoyed writing. He conceived this small building like a tribute to himself, with the names of his works carved into the stone and a cabinet projected only for him. The result is an undefinable place, out of time.

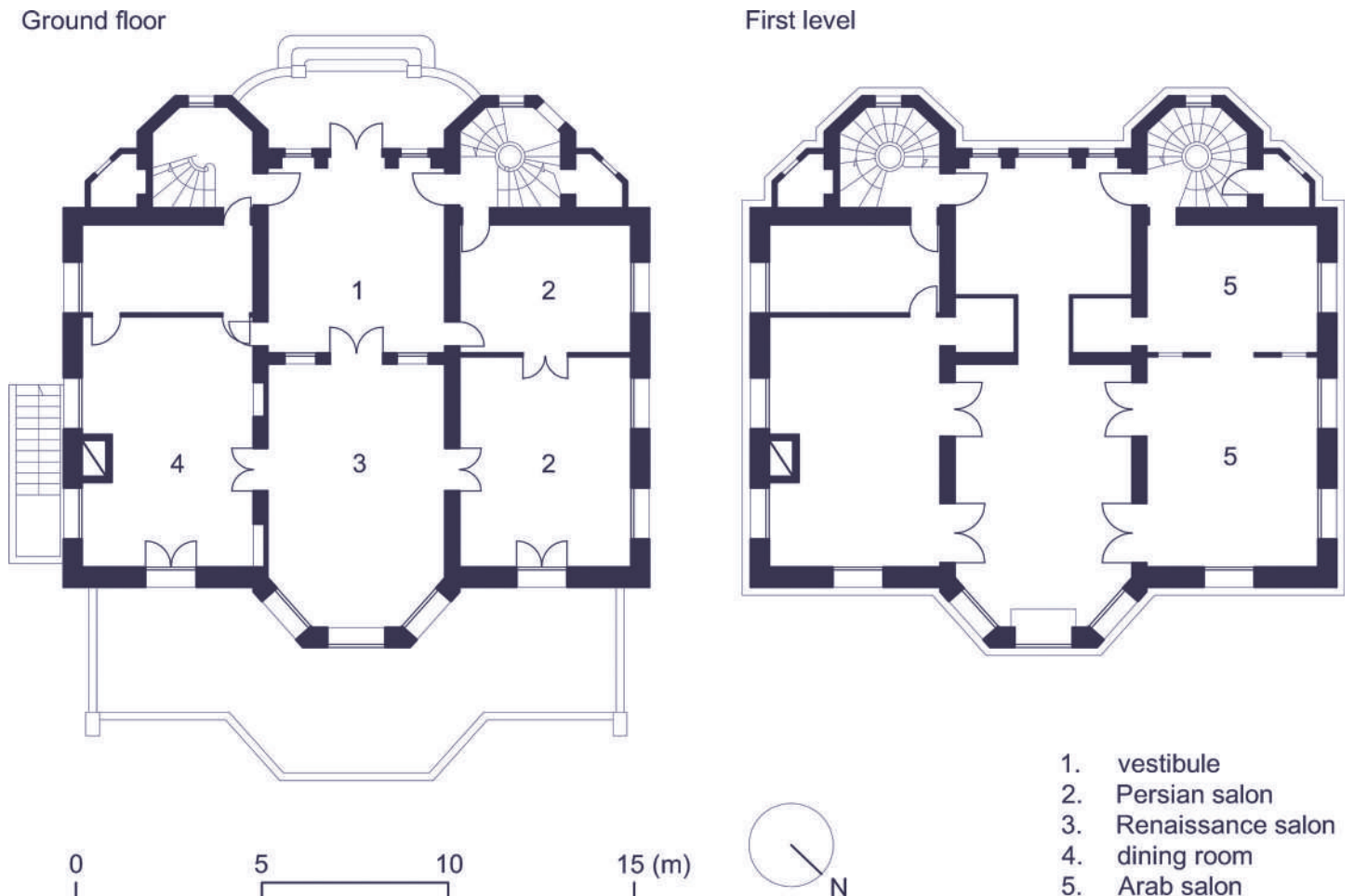


Fig. 8 – Ground floor and first level of the Château de Monte Cristo

Both buildings are interdependent and represent two sides of a “folly” definition based on pleasure. This dichotomy shows us what an ideal architecture for Dumas was.

A condenser of experiences

His dream became true because he had the strength and character to achieve it. Although Alexandre Dumas was one of the most prolific writers of all time, he could not really afford to make such a folly reality, hence he took advantage of something more important which was his unbridled confidence in achieving whatever he set his mind to do. But what exactly did Dumas set out to do?

The main function of the Château de Monte Cristo, beyond fulfilling the requirements of a comfortable home for him, his family and his lovers, was to create the ideal setting for diverse kinds of parties, to receive countless guests in the best possible conditions, and to offer an indelible memory to each and every one of the guests, as well as the host. And that was the true origin of such excessive madness. The building was a creator and condenser of experiences.

To conceive his boundless literary universe, Dumas needed to rely on physical reality, on an architecture that could condition the real world according to his designs. Although we might think that the building is made up of enormous rooms meant to receive the greatest number of guests, in reality, we are faced with a succession of smaller rooms that compartmentalise each floor (Fig. 8). The aim is to condense the space in order to densify the life that took place in it, to live more and learn more in less time, and to extract from that experience the material needed to write all kinds of stories.

A support for literature

To create thousands of characters, Dumas needed to surround himself with a crowd, from which to vamp their names and faces. He also sought the necessary calm to transfer his impressions to paper. Hence, the creation of a small pavilion where he could take refuge at any time when inspiration required it, while the party continued in the main château; a

place where he could separate himself from the real world to create the fictitious one. But more than seeking inspiration, which always accompanied him, Dumas needed to feed an overflowing imagination, a continuous torrent that flowed out of his head like the streams running through the grounds. And all this was the economic sustenance of his idyllic world, which Dumas believed to be invincible, but which would prove to be insufficient for his unbounded ambition. The château ended up being so excessive that it suffocated its own creator.

Dumas used the reality to complete his own imagination. The people he met, the conversations and the situations that took place at his parties could be compared with the historical researches he made to realise the scenes of his novels. Everything was transformed in literature, according to his sensibility. He wanted to be surprised by what he could not foresee, as for example, the hypnotism sessions that changed Dumas' mind significantly. Following those experiences, he decided to start writing his memoirs. The contact with something he could not control, situated at the limits of the conscience and associated with recent death of several friends, motivated him to review his existence.

Dumas liked to invite renowned cooks to organise his parties and to provide him with new recipes and culinary secrets (his last publication was a cookery book³¹). Details of drinks and meals are frequently quoted on the pages of his novels. If we look at Dumas' work, we see that his literary production increased during his residency at the château, especially at 1849, when he was besieged by debts and needed to write feverishly to maintain his lifestyle.³²

A reflex from literature

Dumas' texts are agile and full of information. Not only does the main story branch out countless times, lengthening and shortening as the author wishes, but it is also accompanied by a large number of side stories, which could be the subject of several independent books. The dialogues are extended to draw us into the story. The scene changes are rapid,

and the action always leaves us wanting to know what happens in the next chapter. Remember that Dumas was literally paid for every written word, for every page published weekly in the newspaper of the day, in the format of the serial, of which he became a great master.

That is what we find in the architecture that comes out of his imagination, in this folly that he relates to his architect as if it were just another serial. The façades are overloaded and display many things happening, similarly to his novels. Despite the fact that his architect tried to create several volumes and lighten the whole, the proportions do not help. The Renaissance style shows Dumas' interest in the past. At the time he conceived the château, he only wrote historical novels. Once over the threshold, one experiences surprise after surprise, wondering what kind of room follows when the next door is opened, as if there was just another novel. That is because Dumas conceived this palace with the others in mind. Remember that even the name of the house was given by a guest. He wanted to embrace visitors with the excess he loved so much, as the Count of Monte Cristo did. His purpose was to amaze and provoke unexpected reactions in guests, creating anecdotes that served to write novels.

The literary environment must also be taken into account when analysing the building. The client was a writer, who provided a vision of reality transformed by literature. Thus, the small rooms that make up the château were, in part, the result of spaces conceived as theatrical scenes, like any novel.

This division allowed him to create several atmospheres, capable of simultaneously providing something different. The music, the animation, the guests and the conversations, changed in each space, like a metaphor for the diversity of the world that Dumas knew so well from his travels. Although it is impossible to confirm, it seems that the author wanted to give form to the spaces imagined in his texts and to put himself in the shoes of his characters, to live what they have lived, or what they were going to live. He might have wanted to control a world he had created down to the smallest

detail, just as it happens in each of the pages of his novels. Thus, when we see the Arab salon, we easily imagine the Count of Monte Cristo, accustomed to decorating all his homes in oriental style, lying on one of his divans, calmly smoking opium.

LEARNING FROM MONTE CRISTO

A folly for post-pandemic times

As we stroll through the rooms of the Château de Monte Cristo and along the paths of its garden, we wonder if the construction of such a folly could be repeated in post-pandemic times and if the desire to recover the lost life is capable of giving sufficient impetus to realise all those projects that restrictions have relegated to the limbo of frustration. What would happen then if we were to strip the Château de Monte Cristo of the museum it has become and return it to its original use? It makes more sense than ever to reclaim this experience condenser, to fill its rooms with modern-day distractions and to offer an indelible memory to those who attend and who should not have to pay an entrance fee, in honour of its generous creator.

If we learnt from Dumas' folly, we could imagine a new kind of architecture that became the perfect support for any type of enjoyment. In the 19th century, a good meal, a drink or a conversation, a concert or a theatre play were enough to have a good time. Since then, entertainment has evolved and multiplied. Nowadays, thanks to technology, it is changing fast and in unpredictable ways. Architecture could offer the physical support for virtual recreation activities, in order to intensify the final experience. For example, if we use a virtual reality headset, our movements are limited by the space around us. To play in a small room or to play in a big place, where we can run or climb stairs, does not provide the same experience. In this way, it would be possible to modify the real world according to the rules of the virtual one, and vice-versa.

Following this complementary

relationship, real spaces could show what the screens would never be able to display. They could create a hybrid area that can develop new kinds of amusements and redefine a new type of social interaction. Knowing that leisure is intimately linked to social, and on-site interaction does not have the same effect than the virtual one, architecture might be the key to create a remarkable experience. In this context, it should not be forgotten that the most important is not to be amused, but to learn from amusement, like Dumas did. For him, entertainment was not only a break of reality, but the way he nurtured his work.

Architecture should regulate the complex relationship between leisure, work and social, facilitating the necessary interaction and feedback in a reunited space. Le Corbusier already worked with these concepts in his *Unité d'habitation*, where he successfully overlapped different usages, keeping the quality of each space. Over the benefits of a physical proximity, the final objective of this kind of architecture is to enrich each domain, creating a new dimension of life.

A rhythm of life regulator

Moreover, every city would gain on having this architecture, capable of changing the rhythm of life of its users according to their needs. During the changing restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, the time devoted to leisure and social interaction has been drastically reduced, while that devoted to work has increased.

The disappearance of the limits between leisure and work has, during this time, generated psychological problems, while for Alexandre Dumas that was his way of living. New architecture should allow its users to control their limits and to adapt them to their sensibility.

If we transpose the role of experience condenser of the Château de Monte Cristo to a part of an existing construction, like a widget that could be added to revitalize an old building, we can understand this kind of architecture like a prosthetic. An external or internal module added afterwards would create a place to

develop leisure and social interaction.

Similarly, to the residential buildings, this principle could be applied in work spaces. For example, big companies have already made it following the Google example, providing places that allow alternating work with fun. This "Monte Cristo" space will quickly become a necessity to allow the inhabitants to take a break. The overlapping usages will intensify the experience of life in a similar way the applications of augmented reality can show information that complete our perception of the world.

The existence of this new type of architecture would offer, for example, the possibility of catching up on lost leisure time after a period of significant work, or of alternating moments of production and relaxation, according to the sensitivity and the rhythm of each person. In this way, a pattern would be created that would facilitate the personal fulfilment of each user, who could choose the type of desired experience, depending on the intensity of each stage of life, as Dumas himself did.

A new world

Dumas wanted to live as many lives as he could in a single lifetime. This is reflected in his château, whose unclassifiable mixture of elements can only be explained in literature, that leitmotiv that deforms reality to create a space in its own likeness, at the height of an excessive author.

Let's go back to that dinner party of 600 guests and feel like that happy Alexandre Dumas, who strolls among the tables with the smile and satisfaction of someone who has made a dream come true. He does not know how long it will last, hence he takes advantage of it as much as he can.

Let us celebrate once again the birth of a building that stages the victory of life over death, of joy over sadness, of excess over limitations. Let us raise our glass of champagne to clink it against the glass of a jubilant Dumas.

Let us drink to his health and to the new world, and dream, in a summer night, that everything is still possible.

NOTES

¹ DUMAS, Alexandre. Les Trois Mousquetaires. Calmann-Lévy, 1894, 114.

² BALZAC, Honoré. Lettres à Mme. Hanska. 1847, 478.

³ SCHOPP, Claude. Alexandre Dumas: Le génie de la vie. Editions Mazarine, 1985, 357.

⁴ RABELAIS, François. Gargantua. Paris: La Sirène, 1919, chapters LII to LVIII.

⁵ Nestor Roqueplan was the director of the journal *Le Figaro* and a Dumas' friend.

⁶ ZIMMERMANN, Daniel. Alexandre Dumas Le Grand. Editions Phébus, 2002, 467-468.

⁷ Liste of Dumas' companions extracted from SIGAUX Gilbert. Le château de Monte-Cristo (preface of tome III of *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo*). Editions Rencontre, 1969, 14

⁸ According to Daniel Zimmermann, 606 titles have been identified by Dominique Frémy and Claude Schopp, while 646 have been analysed by Réginald Hamel and Pierrette Méthé.

⁹ Elements of the villa Médicis extracted from ZIMMERMANN, Daniel. Alexandre Dumas Le Grand. Editions Phébus, 2002, 357, 463.

¹⁰ Dialogue extract from ZIMMERMANN (2002, 454-455).

¹¹ Numbers from SIGAUX Gilbert. Le château de Monte-Cristo (preface of tome III of *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo*). Editions Rencontre, 1969, 8-9.

¹² SIGAUX Gilbert. Le château de Monte-Cristo (preface of tome III of *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo*). Editions Rencontre, 1969, 11.

¹³ SCHOPP, Claude. Alexandre Dumas: Le génie de la vie. Editions Mazarine, 1985, 367.

¹⁴ DUMAS, Alexandre. De Paris à Cadix. Garnier frères, 1847-1848, 11.

¹⁵ Details of Dumas travel to Algeria from SCHOPP, Claude. Alexandre Dumas: Le génie de la vie. Editions Mazarine, 1985, 357.

¹⁶ DUMAS, Alexandre. Le Véloce, ou

Tanger, Alger et Tunis. Alexandre Cadot, 1848-1851.

¹⁷ Details of Montecristo opening party from SCHOPP, Claude. Alexandre Dumas: Le génie de la vie. Editions Mazarine, 1985, 383.

¹⁸ SIGAUX Gilbert. Le château de Monte-Cristo (preface of tome III of *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo*). Editions Rencontre, 1969, 13.

¹⁹ MAROIS, André. Les Trois Dumas. Hachette 1957, 229.

²⁰ Château outdoor description from LECOMTE Louis-Henry. Alexandre Dumas, 1802-1870. Sa vie intime, ses Œuvres. Tallandier, 1902, 52.

²¹ Château indoor description from LECOMTE Louis-Henry. Alexandre Dumas, 1802-1870. Sa vie intime, ses Œuvres. Tallandier, 1902, 52.

²² Liste of weapons from SCHOPP, Claude. Alexandre Dumas: Le génie de la vie. Editions Mazarine, 1985, 382.

²³ Château decoration details from SCHOPP, Claude. A. Dumas: Le génie de la vie. Editions Mazarine, 1985, 382-383.

²⁴ Liste of animals from DUMAS, Alexandre. Histoire de mes bêtes. Michel Lévy, 1867.

²⁵ Details of the hypnotism session from DUMAS, Alexandre. Une séance de magnétisme chez M. Alexandre Dumas. La dernière année de Marie Dorval. Librairie nouvelle, 1855.

²⁶ SCHOPP, Claude. Alexandre Dumas: Le génie de la vie. Editions Mazarine, 1985, 386.

²⁷ SCHOPP, Claude. Alexandre Dumas: Le génie de la vie. Editions Mazarine, 1985, 396.

²⁸ SCHOPP, Claude. Alexandre Dumas: Le génie de la vie. Editions Mazarine, 1985, 397.

²⁹ SCHOPP, Claude. Alexandre Dumas: Le génie de la vie. Editions Mazarine, 1985, 419.

³⁰ SAUNDERS, Edith. La Dame aux Camélias et les Dumas. Corrêa, 1954, 11.

³¹ DUMAS, Alexandre. Le Grand Dictionnaire de cuisine. Henri

Veyrier, 1873.

³² Dumas' works published during his residency at the Château de Monte-Cristo:

-1947: De Paris à Cadix, Les Quarante-cinq, Le Vicomte de Bragelonne.

-1948: Le Véloce, Le Collier de la reine.

-1949: Le Comte Hermann, Les Mariages du père Olifus, Les Gentilshommes de la Sierra Morena, Un dîner chez Rossini, La femme au collier de velours, Le Testament de M. de Chauvelin, Les Mille et Un fantômes.

-1950: La Tulipe noire, Le Trou de l'Enfer, Dieu dispose, Ange Pitou.

-1951: Le Drame de quatre-vingt-treize, Jacques Bonhomme, Olympe de Clèves, Mes mémoires.

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FIGURES

Fig. 1 – BELMAR, Marcos, 2021.

Fig. 2 - Woodcut published in the journal *L'illustration* on 26 Feb 1848.

Fig. 3 – BELMAR, Marcos, 2021.

Fig. 4 – BELMAR, Marcos, 2021.

Fig. 5 – Woodcut published in the journal *L'illustration* on 26 February 1848.

Fig. 6 – BELMAR, Marcos, 2021.

Fig. 7 – SIGNES landscape architects, COUSSERAN, Alain, 2000.

Fig. 8 – BELMAR, Marcos, 2021.