

3 Narratives on UOUSj #10 IN DETAIL

Letter from the director

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THE BOOKSELLER

In an autobiographical essay, Mario Vargas Llosa recounts that as a young man he worked selling books from village to village to earn a living. During those journeys he would pass the time reading the books he sold, an experience that proved decisive in his literary formation.

The essay describes how, as time went by, he tried to remember the title of one of those books that had deeply impressed him. He searched for it in second-hand bookshops and spoke about it to acquaintances in an attempt to find a clue to its title and author. Years passed without any trace of it, until he finally found it and read it again. At that moment he confessed that it did not resemble the book he remembered. Over time, he had idealised it in his memory:

"When I read it again, I discovered that it was not the book I had remembered."

The essay reflects on how imagination and time transform our readings, a distorting yet creative power of memory.

In fact, the text entitled "The Bookseller" is included in the



This article is dedicated to the memory of Mario Vargas Llosa.

collection of essays *The Truth of Lies* (Seix Barral, 1990), in which Vargas Llosa reflects on fiction, reading and his own experience as a reader.

This mismatch between the original work and its appropriation by our memory suggests the following aspects, which can also be applied to architecture:

- *The Passage of Time*: Re-reading a work at different ages or moments in life reveals that it is not static; it changes with you.

- *Subjective Reality*: The remembered work is not the real one, but the version constructed by the mind. One could even argue

that memory and desire are the elements that shape our reality.

- *The Complexity of the Work*: As with a great book, great architecture is never exhausted. Each re-reading is a new truth.

- *Disenchantment and Discovery*: This involves a moment of "discovery" that may entail a slight disappointment yet is accompanied by a positive revelation in realising that the work is more complex.

In all these aspects, reflection centres on how memory allows us to imagine and complete, giving life to the original project.

DESIRING PRACTICES

I began teaching architecture in London, an experience that was memorable in every respect. This was in the 1990s, a context full of debates on critical theory and experimental practices in architecture, and also because my courses were directed by Katerina Rüedi, a teacher of teachers.

At that time Katerina proposed that I help her with the ambitious project she was organising together with Sarah Wigglesworth and Duncan McCorquodale: *Desiring Practices: Architecture, Gender and the Interdisciplinary*. It consisted of a series of exhibitions, lectures and a symposium held in 1995, debating three main themes:

- How gender structures influence architectural production.
- The interdisciplinary nature of creative practices.
- Ways of rethinking architecture beyond traditional models.

At the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), an exhibition and a symposium were held, featuring international lectures and presentations over several days, as well as debates among architects, theorists, artists and professionals in various locations across the city, including art galleries and even buildings under construction. After the event, the book *Desiring Practices: Architecture, Gender and the Interdisciplinary* (Black Dog Publishing, 1996) was published, a collective essay bringing together texts by multiple invited authors who had participated in or reflected upon the project and the ideas presented in London.

In addition, a small catalogue of selected works was published, *Desiring Practices* (Black Dog Publishing, 1996), consisting of a paper box containing loose sheets with a short text and an illustration by each artist.

Among them, I was fascinated by the drawing on Angela Kyriacou's card. Although it appeared to depict a construction detail, it in fact

represented an action provoked by it. Firstly, the drawing becomes a critique of an architectural solution that is not fully resolved, namely the floor guide of a sliding lift door: the groove in the floor may cause an accident by trapping the heel of a stiletto shoe.

Immediately afterwards, this observation of reality is transformed into an opportunity to generate a story, giving continuity to the construction detail through the lives of its users.

Since that moment in 1995, I have referred to this drawing in many of my classes. Later, while working at the University of Alicante, I tried to contact Angela Kyriacou to inform her of the impact her work had had on my teaching, as well as on the conception and illustration of my projects, such as the *Biblioplaya*—a library on the beach of Garrucha (Spain), where, when taking a book from the glass shelf, through the gap it left behind, a love story could always emerge. There were many attempts to locate Angela, all unsuccessful. She had disappeared from London and even from the internet.

A long time passed until, twenty years later in 2015, I travelled to the architecture school of the University of Nicosia (Cyprus) as an Erasmus teacher. To my surprise, I found Angela teaching there. The explanation for her "disappearance" lay in the Cypriot custom for women to adopt their husband's surname upon marriage. It was a happy moment to finally speak with Angela Petrou, her new identity, and to ask her to show me the collection of her extraordinary Final Degree Project drawings.

My second surprise was to realise that the original drawing did not perfectly match what I remembered. As with "The Bookseller", in my explanations describing Angela's drawing I had involuntarily added elements and characters over time. Admittedly, there is a major difference between this story and that of Vargas Llosa: the lift detail remained the same and retained its quality.

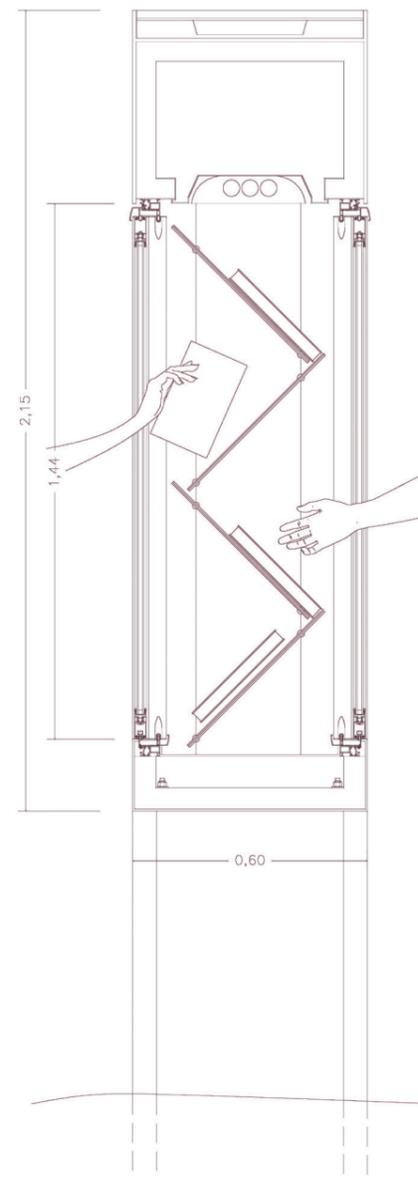


Fig.2a+b+c - *Biblioplaya Garrucha* (Spain).

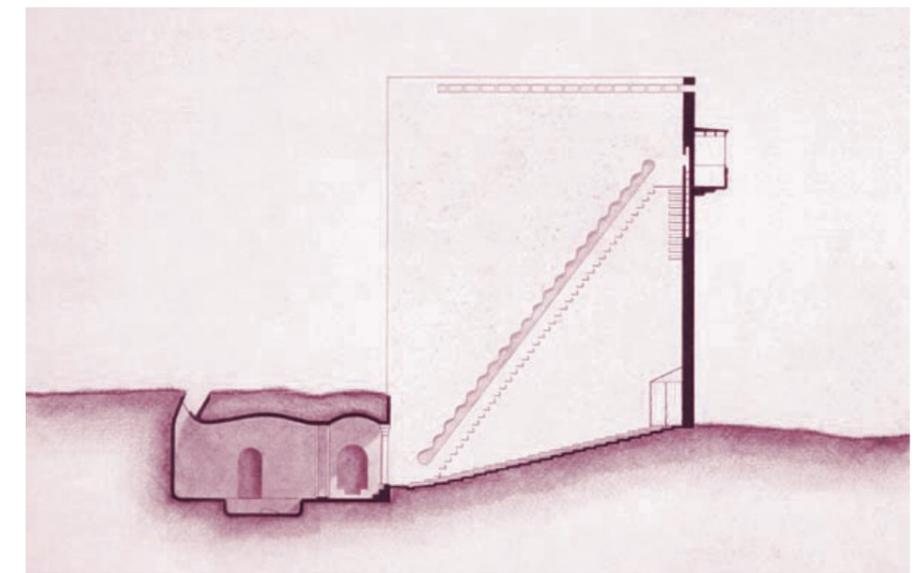
Fig.3 - *House for a couple, Córdoba, Spain*. Original drawing from 1975, by Emilio Ambasz.

HOUSE FOR A COUPLE, CORDOBA

STORIES OF HOUSES (<https://storiesofhouses.blogspot.com>) is a collection of articles narrating the origins of significant contemporary houses. I wrote them together with Halldóra Arnardóttir, and although this was more than twenty years ago, they remain of interest due to their timeless nature. They are examples of architectures that will always be relevant, as they deal with personal emotions with which we all identify: information about clients, their desires and requests, without which one cannot fully understand the final result.

One of the texts we worked with for the collection was the one explaining the *House for Spiritual Retreat* by Emilio Ambasz. This house was presented in the exhibition *In-Depth* (MoMA, 2005) as a project designed in 1979 and recently built in Córdoba (Spain). A young couple without children had commissioned the Argentine architect to design this weekend house in order to "reflect on their destinies."

In this sense, the house provides a setting for the family's daily rituals—listening to music while looking at the moon and the stars, or the possibility of cooking while at the same time watching their future children play in another room through the courtyard. These are actions carried out by people of different ages, with different ways of perceiving and different ways of looking at reality. "Giving poetic



form to the pragmatic," explains Ambasz, who responded to the project by "eliminating architecture." The only element left standing was the façade, "like a mask replacing architecture."

Architecture disappeared and one could only see the earth beneath which the pragmatic elements of the dwelling were organised. Insulated with earth, which naturally preserves coolness in the arid southern climate, the house is inspired by the traditional Andalusian dwelling with its central courtyard onto which the rooms open. The long, continuous living area is defined by soft cavities excavated in the ground. A second, more internal curvilinear courtyard ensures cross-ventilation and allows a more direct and informal access to the exterior.

Interested in learning more about the conversations between the clients and the architect, we discovered that in 1980 the project had won the award granted by the American magazine *Progressive Architecture* to unbuilt projects that nevertheless challenge the limits of the profession. We then discovered that the original project was called *House for a couple, Córdoba (Spain)*, with a real date of 1975, a year before the architect founded his studio *Emilio Ambasz and Associates*. That is to say, this had been one of the architect's first projects, or possibly even the Final Degree Project of a talented student.

Furthermore, we also revealed that the house currently known as the *House for Spiritual Retreat* in fact belongs to the architect himself, its true owner.

For me, as a design studio professor, the idea that a Final Degree Project has become such an authentic experience of what each student understands architecture to be is sublime. This relationship is so powerful and personal that, in Ambasz's case, even after many years of professional practice and important built projects, he nevertheless felt the need to build it in order to breathe life into the dream of those drawings. I doubt that there are many similar cases in the history of architecture. One example that always comes to mind—but no, it is not the same, as it was never built—is the story and the *House for Josephine Baker* by Adolf Loos.

At the architecture school in Alicante, we like to refer to the Final Degree Project as the Career Starting Project, attributing to it an important character that will accompany the student throughout their professional life.

In the case of Emilio Ambasz, thirty years passed before its materialisation, the same amount of time that has passed in the case of Angela Kyriacou Petrou with this issue of *UOU In Detail*. Both cases demonstrate the enduring relevance of their enormous commitment to Architecture already as students.