Form, space and site : an interview with Carme Pinos

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An interview with Carme Pinos

The following interview with Carme Pinos was recorded on april 16th 1997 during her visit to the ETH as part of a lecture series organized by architectura and the First Year Course.

Mrs Pinos, William Curtis quoted W. C. Williams in reference to your work with Enric Miralles: there are "no ideas but in things."
In view of that, what importance does the abstract definition of form have in your work?

I begin a project when I know the sensations that I want to provoke, which are always the ones that a site suggested to me and my interpretation of the demands made on me by the site and the program.

Looking at your school in Morella, it seems that form is not a product, but part of a conception of space. Is the idea of form always connected to the idea of space and site in your work?

Perhaps I could explain the process of how we reached the final form in the school of Morella.

At the outset of a project we think a lot about the relationship between architecture and the site. In Morella we wanted to be in harmony with the landscape, almost melting together with it. The school is located in an old town with a castle on top of the hill. We decided not to compete with the castle, not to have that kind of an imposing impact on the landscape. The castle should remain the protagonist because the city lives off the money generated by tourism.

The first step was to think what the experiential meaning of a school is. The most important point is how the space is going to be felt. The light has to be treated

in such way that one can approach from any direction, so that the view flows through the building without being hindered by a wall.

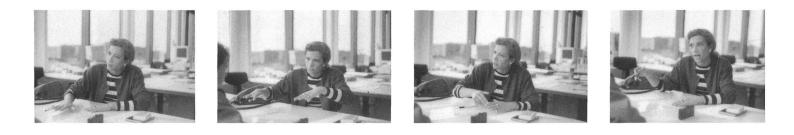*Is form then a product of the program?*

No, a program is more than the rational assumption of space. Each time you have to question the meaning of a program. There is no general recipe for program and site and so there is no recipe for what it means to make a form, to make architecture.

In your projects form seems to be intensively related to social action. Would you say that form is a product of the site or is the making of form more inspired by an abstract idea?

Form always has a relation to one's own sensibility. Themes like ambiguity, the limit, the border and the interrelation with the place are themes which I use to find forms. How to sew things together by making architecture, are a part of my personal interpretation and sensibility. I work with the ambiguous dimension of a site and try to find the relation with the landscape, the state of harmony of a place. For me architecture is an interpretation of the limit between landscape and object.

Making architecture, making a form, is always a process, a development, like an interaction between the space, the use and the site. Therefore a spontaneous idea of form does not exist.

The modern dictum of "Form follows Function" has evalued into interpretation of images. Currently, form seems to be more motivated by keywords like

"association" and "identity". It deals much more with an emotional rather than a technological approach. What kind of importance do these aspects have on your work?

I think that architecture must respond to more than basic function. To answer only to the question of function would be too simple. Real architecture starts when the problem of function is resolved. Architecture is space, and also the medium to use the space with human sensation and emotion. It is activity, personal exploration and experience. One function can be substituted by another. Needs of society change with time, but by the arrangement of light and the setting in space, architecture can be defined without the definition of function. For example, in our first project we built a school within an old context of an industrial building and in the future it will be something else. When we built the school we wanted to built a space that can offer certain qualities to children: A sensation of freedom, connection with nature and a sensation of protection, but not of control. We tried to realize these points by the use of light and space. For me form is always connected to emotion.

All your projects are located in a suburban context; The periphery is gaining more importance as a sector that architects have to respond to. How do you deal with a situation that is neither city nor landscape?

I like to work at places with broken limits, because in a way it is exactly that connection to site and landscape, that sewing of architecture into landscape, which I focus on in my work.

Normally the landscape in Spain is broken and disordered. In my last projects I was trying to build the connection between city, free landscape, countryside and urban space. Somehow I managed to make something in between urban space and landscape. A kind of artificial landscape.

Recently I worked on a project for a bridge and a square, where I tried to integrate the landscape by following the movement of the site, operating on the limit between the artificial and the natural conditions of the site. I start trying to read the lines of the place for my personal interpretation. I want to intervene subtly with the landscape. I do not want to impose a strong or clear geometry on the site.

There is another project for a bar, located in the dunes. The concept of the project was developed by studying the traces of animals one can see walking there. I based the shape and form of the project on these lines of movement in the terrain.

Is that a kind of metaphorical approach towards architecture?

There is always something that can be found by drawing lines, finding hidden traces, which I suppose are there, but can not be seen.

I do not have a connection with a special formal aesthetic. I always want to be surprised by shapes, by the ideas that come into my mind while working on a project. But in a way this is not quite true, because everybody has a certain aesthetic affinity towards what one considers to be beautiful.

My architecture belongs to the mediterranean context and climate. I work with light and shadow, the special colour of light which belongs to the Mediterranean.

My architecture grows out of my observations of Spain, my society and my personal context. In this way, I see myself and my sense of this environment expressed through my built work.

Today architecture belongs more and more to the magazines than to the society. In general, students at the

University copy published images, duplicating forms without any sense of context, without analysis, or interpretation, all of which I consider intrinsic to the creation of new forms and spaces.

I understand my work as a process, form is an evolution of this process. Making this process coherent is part of my intention.

Observing the development of major projects in big cities, particulary airports and trainstations, one can make out a preference for a certain kind of international style, a tendency for a monotonous language. What are your thoughts about this situation?

Architects can not continue to disregard ecological issues in the context of the built environment. The waste of energy for air-conditioning in glass and steel architecture must be rethought. The evolution of architecture must be directed towards an awareness of themes like temperature or weather as part of the indigenous cultural context of design. The ever increasing presence of globalisation threatens to destroy these connections to the local environment. The omnipotence of technology over nature, resulting from the arguments of economic gain, are no longer acceptable when one aknowleges the ecological and cultural loss.

Does that mean that architecture has to respect the regional or traditional aspects of form ?

I dont like to use the word tradition when talking about architecture. I prefer the word memory, the identification of a society with particular qualities and diverse practices that one should understand as part of the conditions of the site.

Do you think it is possible to develop architecture without particular references, for example in a competition where there is not enough time or information on the context of society?

To me this focus is a responsibility to society and culture. An architect has to develop projects in an certain social and geographical context, otherwise it would go the way of Mc Donald's, standardized architecture resulting from economic marketing strategies. An architect has to read the cultural and spatial topography of a place. The most interesting fact about Mc Donald's is that the enterprise itself creates the need for their products before intervening into the context. Some architecture does that, too.