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A Mosaic House in Andalucía

Climbing on the mountainside at the village of Archez in south-eastern Andalucía, just a stone's throw from Costa Del Sol, a multicoloured, rounded house with mosaic flowing all over, and strange shapes like rolling waves with figures out of some fairytale, has of course raised a lively local debate. The strange house has become a tourist attraction and the Spanish villagers are proud to show people coming up from the coast the extra-terrestrial buildings tossed between the whitewashed, traditional Spanish houses.

When the building work was most intensive, hundreds of villagers and other curious passers-by gathered around to see what was being created. And many of the spectators, of course, also came to have a look at the four odd figures working on the building site. One huge French person with long, blond hair, a small, weasel-like Italian and two Spaniards, who, in true anarchistic spirit, created the house through discussions and agreements. Sometimes a local artist would drop by to do some small statue or a painting.

'We had to put up a fence after a while. It just didn't work having people walking around looking at what we were doing and putting their hands here and there,' says Manolo, or Jose Manuel which is his real name.





Manolo is one of the four creators of the magic building. On a mountain a bit further away he has continued building in the same spirit by himself; so far he has built four small mosaic houses and a couple of others out of stone. When sceptics and a few local builders unite to condemn the manner of building, Jose Manuel just smiles and for the hundredth time explains why they built the house the way they did.

‘We wanted to show that it is possible to build a house in another way than the normal, besides, doing it cheaper. As far as possible we’ve used recycled materials, discarded tiles, glass bottles, bits of sheet metal and small stones from the beaches,’ says Jose Manuel.

Still smiling, he describes how they tried to create a house using ‘round heads’, instead of the ‘square-heads who create square houses’. And for those who see the building as a work of drug-addicts, Jose Manuel has no compassion: ‘They don’t know what they’re talking about. The building is almost 100 per cent designed by an architect, all the plumbing, electricity, water system and everything is regulated in the same way as other houses. What we have done is the colouring and some artistic finish, all achieved through hard labour. There is absolutely nothing spaced-out about this building.’

It took three years to complete the building, a little longer than calculated, because the people involved had to do other construction work to make their living. And, in a sense, the delay connects with four strong wills trying to make ends meet. ‘Of course there were some conflicts along the way. However, we solved them and the whole project wasn’t only an experiment in house-building but also a creative, artistic experiment,’ says Jose Manuel.



The architect behind the extraordinary house is Emilio Alvarez from Malaga. Standing outside the shaded, lilac-painted front porch he says the idea first emerged as early as 1975 when he had just graduated and wanted to create something new. ‘My basic idea then, and later, was to start from how you build a circus marquee. There you stretch giant canvases over ropes or strings. My plan was to do the same with flexible iron laths and then pour cement over it all. When the cement stiffened it would be so hard you wouldn’t need any extra pillars,’ he explains.



His elder brother Moises Alvarez, also an architect, liked the idea so much he decided to spend time and money to make it work in a larger scale. After several costly tests, he succeeded in building two houses on the coast in Girona, in Catalonia, a bungalow in the same area, a couple of terraced houses in Cordoba and a series of houses in Costa Rica. Moises also made sure he got a patent for the specific building technique.

‘There’s nothing strange or odd about this way of building houses. On the contrary, it’s a classical method which makes it possible to create



patterns and to use materials that are not used in conventional housebuilding,' says Emilio Alvarez. His first own project was building a hotel, Los Caracoles in 1994, in nearby Torrox and the success with that made Emilio Alvarez look for other places, preferably in small villages. 'We chose Archez because it was a small and simple village where there wasn't the power structures that would want to be involved in the building.'

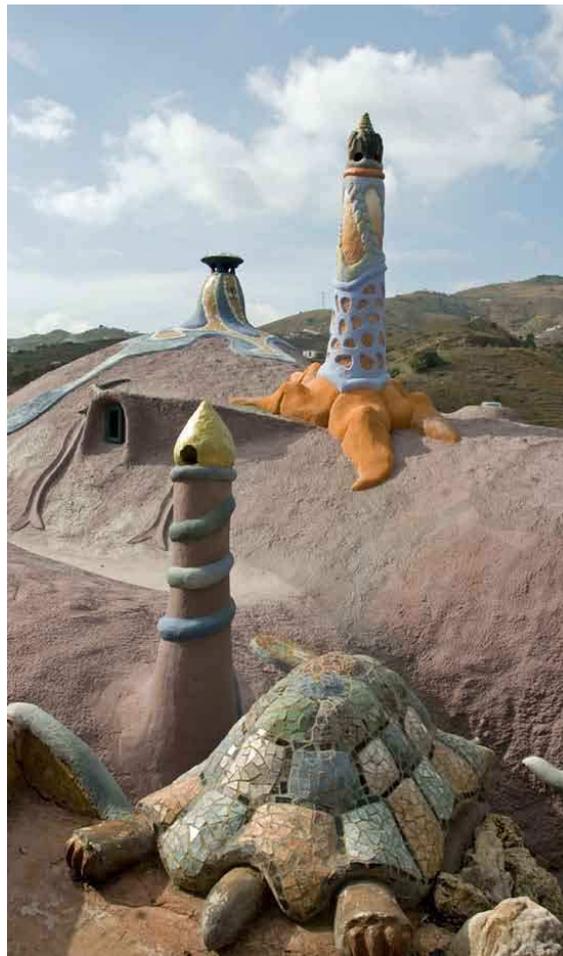


He was himself involved in the building work as much as he could. 'I saw the Archez project as much a building experiment as a social experiment and in a way also a minor revolt against economic thinking in general,' says Emilio Alvarez. A revolt not just by using recycled material but as a way of showing that it is possible to build houses in other ways than the conventional methods. 'It is more complicated and more expensive to build conventionally. There's a lot more planning and straight lines that demand certain materials. A way of building that is easy for standardization, but works badly.'

He gets excited and starts talking about curved houses, vaults, cupola roofs that have existed for thousands of years, and most of them have survived decay much better than later, straight-lined houses. It is, of course, also a matter of aesthetics. The houses become more beautiful if the building technique can work with softer patterns. 'With the way of building we use here in Archez, we can create almost any patterns. For materials, we only use cement, sand, water and iron laths. We don't have to consider prefabricated materials and wooden constructions.'

A couple of years back, Spain's most well-known architect, Antonio Gaudi, was celebrated in Barcelona and other places in the country. And the most common question to the builders in Archez along the way was, of course, how much was an influence from the great master?

'We are of course influenced by Gaudi, Hunderthwasser, Jujol and others as an unavoidable cultural heritage. However, we haven't in any part followed a pattern or style of these masters. But, yes, we use the same materials with broken tiles when we create around patterns,' says Emilio Alvarez. He'd rather see the Archez project as a way to pay homage to these masters.





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