Bomb Magazine: Interview with architect Tatiana Bilbao

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Ventura House, 2008–2011, single-family house, San Pedro Garza García, Nuevo León, Mexico. Photo by Iwan Baan.

Tatiana Bilbao
by Terence Gower

I met Tatiana Bilbao for breakfast at my apartment on a cold January morning. In the background, the usual stream of sirens from emergency vehicles tore down Seventh Avenue at intervals of about thirty minutes. Bilbao and I had met several times in both Mexico City and New York, but this was the first opportunity to have a proper conversation about her practice. The main themes that emerged from our discussion are close to my own interests and preoccupations: the relativistic meaning of materials and forms, the importance of built architecture over paper architecture, the problem of fashion and style. Bilbao has built projects in many countries and maintains an office in Europe, but we focused mainly on her work in Mexico.

My father, an architect, told me many years ago that the work of the architect is essentially problem-solving, and it's true that our conversation mostly took the form of describing the problem at the heart of a commission, followed by a description of Bilbao's often surprising solution. I came to realize she is one of the rare practitioners to maintain a critical view of the state of the profession while at the same time building a successful practice on a set of values separate from the mainstream. Bilbao doesn't seek to be a leader, to proselytize, or to claim some kind of movement or style. She just practices, designs, and builds, at all scales: houses, cultural facilities, public housing, office buildings. If she seems to be leading by example it is because others have chosen to follow her.

— Terence Gower

Terence Gower: Last year I had dinner at Viajante, a fantastic restaurant in East London, where the chef seemed to be guided solely by the properties of his ingredients—flavors, colors, textures—rather than any cultural influence (e.g., national cuisine) or personal repertory. The same kind of direct, intuitive expression, gently guided by basic conditions, is what I recognize in your practice as an architect.

Tatiana Bilbao: That could be an accurate description...

TG: Let's start with one of your favorite projects.

TB: Okay. A few years ago a client came to see me to design a country house to be built at Lake Chapala, near Guadalajara. She wanted a good-size house, around 300 square meters, with all the usual facilities—three bedrooms, bathrooms, etcetera—but the budget was around $120,000. The easiest response would have been to say, "No way, we need more money to do this," but I became interested in the challenge of taking on this project, with its site and financial limitations.

TG: Ninety-nine percent of architects would have walked away right there. What made you stay?

TB: Architecture only exists when it is built. We should do everything in our power as architects to build—if it stays on paper it's not architecture. In the case of this commission, I really wanted to see what could be physically achieved, perhaps with some new construction technology we hadn't worked with before.

TG: So let's hear the solution you came up with to achieve this impossible task!

TB: We needed to build the house with a material that was nearby, plentiful, and very inexpensive, so we chose to use the soil on the site in rammed-earth construction.

TG: Did you consider adobe?

TB: Rammed-earth is similar to adobe construction for the reasons I just mentioned: it's on-site, plentiful, etcetera. It is an equally ancient building method. This is a technology I had wanted to experiment with and this project offered me the opportunity—and the client had to accept it if we were going to work within her budget. To make a rammed-earth structure, you set up a 12 inch–deep form, fill it with the local earth, and compress it as much as possible before setting up the next 12 inch–deep form on top of that, and so on. We added some cement to the mix for extra rigidity and the walls are more or less 20 inches thick, strong enough to support a poured-in-place concrete roof without columns.

TG: I've seen a picture of this house and the walls have a very beautiful graphic pattern, almost like sedimentary layers in a geological diagram.

TB: Yes, we added pigment to accentuate the layers up to a level of 8 feet to keep the structure at a human scale. Windows and doors were custom-made for the house and we came in exactly on budget.

TG: So I can see there's great satisfaction in hitting on the right solution in these really challenging situations.

TB: In the project I just described, the solution came out of the type of construction we used. I often tailor my projects to the specific skills of the builders we work with. Builders working on construction sites in Mexico generally learn on the job and master very specific techniques. It is our duty to work with those existing techniques and make the construction process the starting point of the architectural process. The quality often comes from the builders' abilities. Materials also can be determined by the skills of the available labor, what they are used to working with, and so on.

TG: Like poured concrete, which has long been such a fine art in Mexico. I'm curious about the funeral home you designed in San Luis Potosí, Mexico. I've never seen photos, but the program has been described to me—it sounds fascinating.

TB: Yes, this was a commission a few years ago from the owners of a number of funeral homes in that region. They had already acquired a plot of land in the city center for this new building. When I visited, I found the plot contained quite a beautiful garden with mature trees, and I decided to keep this untouched as much as possible. In Mexico, the funeral is a very social occasion—a reunion of the family and old friends—and there is as much, if not more, socializing going on as there is mourning of the dead. We looked closely at how existing funeral homes function and discovered that there never is any space provided for this social activity.

TG: It's true; you end up having these hurried, uncomfortable conversations in corridors and stairwells with people you haven't seen in years. One of the first things I noticed when I lived in Mexico is a certain life-affirming culture around death.

TB: Exactly. So we designed these living-room-like spaces that adjoin the chapel where the coffin is displayed. The social exchange happens there. Then the visitor or visitors can have a more intimate encounter with the dead person. Then, from the chapel, a door leads to an enclosed section of the garden where the mourner can be alone in nature. You have these different levels of privacy available to the mourner, who can then exit the funeral home directly from the garden.

TG: Were there any construction challenges in this project?

TB: We built the whole complex entirely in concrete with an aggregate of the area that has a pinkish color. At the end, and after several tests, we understood that if we wanted the color of the aggregate to show, we needed to add a bit of pigment to make it softer. The place, called Funeraria Tangassi, has been open for about three years now and seems to function very well in terms of the separation of spaces I just described. But the owners have told us that visitors keep asking them when they are going to finish construction. It's the unpainted concrete walls. Unfortunately they have decided to paint the building.

TG: Oh no!

TB: This is part of the life of the building and I can't be a tyrant about it. The main thing is that I stay involved in this new phase, by helping to select the paint and so on. We have to accept that not everyone appreciates concrete as a finished material the way we do. So we will paint the interiors of the building; we're working on the color selection now.

TG: This problem is a real interest of mine: how different materials and forms have different meanings to different people. I'm sure you know the story of Le Corbusier's early workers' housing development Pessac, from 1925. Fifty years later, a photographer documented the complex and found the inhabitants had turned Le Corbusier's flat roofs into pitched roofs. His ribbon windows had been walled up into traditional square windows, and his loggias and terraces had been filled in to create a traditional silhouette.

TB: Yes, I knew about those modifications at Pessac. In fact, recently, in researching another project, we discovered that to many people in Mexico a pitched roof signifies a finished house. Traditionally, ever since people started building with concrete, a flat roof on a house actually represents the floor of the next story, still unbuilt.

TG: And always with rebar sticking out ready to anchor the next floor's columns. It's quite charming, like a symbol of vast potential: "One day this will be a ten-story house!"

TB: So what originally symbolized grand aspirations—those ten stories planned for the future—now symbolizes failure. The failure to finish the house. I was approached by Patricia Armendariz who runs a micro-financing organization called Financiera Sustentable that gives loans to very small businesses. Taking advantage of government housing subsidies, she wanted to offer housing to people in her financing program. If a house could be built for under $8,000, then the government would subsidize $3,000. We did a lot of interviews with potential home-owners to find out their space requirements and found that the house absolutely had to have a pitched roof (so it looked finished!) and yet it needed to be expandable, which of course is exactly why people always built with flat roofs and exposed rebar.

TG: With Coca Cola bottles on the rebar for some reason. Not sure why.

TB: This was a huge challenge. We figured out a way—by making interior patios and double-height spaces—for a house-owner to double their space by building partitions, all without exceeding the original footprint of the house, contained under the traditional pitched roof. There's even a water tank fitted in under the roof.

TG: What was available in the way of materials at that construction price? Lots of prefab?

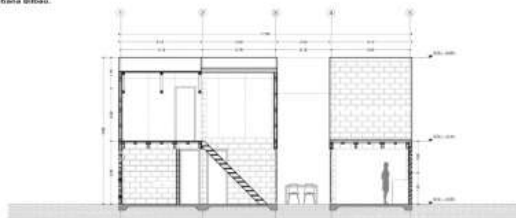
TB: We used shipping palettes as *brise-soleils*, for instance, around the covered kitchen patio. In Mexico, nothing goes to waste and everything is reused, so we actually couldn't get our hands on used palettes—we had to buy new ones. Things like doors and windows were off the shelf—Home Depot, actually. Cost does not include infrastructure hookup, etcetera. We have completed two prototypes (urban and rural versions) and we are starting ten new houses, all in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas.

TG: I'm getting the sense that your work isn't really grounded in any specific tradition, that you are always responding directly to the site and the needs of the client or user in a more intuitive and personal way. But I'd like to know what buildings and architects from the past, especially the postwar period in Mexico, are interesting to you. I'm not talking about influences here, though influence is inevitable, but just what buildings, designers, or even details do you really love?

TB: Mario Pani was one of the great architects of that period. The kinds of solutions he came up with under very harsh financial and technological limitations were always brilliant. Mexico was just developing the technology to build at the scale he wanted to work at and he managed to execute these vast projects with a kind of poetry. I'm interested in his early studies in Paris and his application of ideas he picked up there to the Mexican context.

above:
Drawing for Urban Minimum Housing.

below:
Urban Minimum Housing prototype, 2013–2014, Chiapas, Mexico. Photo by Tatiana Bilbao.



In Europe, working on public projects is much more restrained and serious. There are many contracts involved. In Mexico it's the opposite: nothing is on paper, and things aren't always done the way they are planned.

GRATITUDE OPEN CHAPEL, 2008–2010, Lagunillas, along the Pilgrim's Route in Jalisco, Mexico. Photo by Iwan Baan.

TG: In his early public housing projects Pani was said to draw up proposals *under* budget, unheard of in Mexico. Let's talk for a minute about how your office is structured. First of all, how many are you?

TB: Thirty.

TG: Returning to my first comment about how your work springs from its context and parameters, it doesn't seem to have a recognizable "signature" style. There is no attempt to develop some kind of trademark aesthetic. Instead the look of each project is determined by the particular design challenge you and your team are faced with. I imagine that not having a real "auteur" kind of practice makes it easier to bring in ideas and even design decisions from the whole team. How do you employ your junior designers?

TB: I will describe how we worked on a specific project. Have you ever heard of Sorteos Tec? This is a lottery that is held four times a year as a fund-raiser for the Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey university. The prize is always a house—strange, I know. And the houses have always been terribly designed. Recently, the lottery's organizers came to realize this and decided to hire contemporary architects. We were the first to be invited. I put together a group from the office to research the expectations of the lottery winners by designing a questionnaire for visitors to the most recent model house (the house is actually built, people can visit it, then it is offered in the lottery).

We showed them images of some pretty classic modern houses—even by Mies van der Rohe—to gauge their response, and of course everyone *hated* anything modern. So we had to work with what they hated the least and then concentrate on issues like internal circulation, garages, gardens, etcetera. Next we had a little competition in the office to propose designs. From this kind of brainstorm we worked toward a final design and as we started to see what was going to be required to build this house. I put together the people from the office with the strongest skills for this particular project. In general, I allocate people according to their strengths—maybe someone has skills in urban planning, or landscape design, interior design, and so on, that would be more useful to a certain project.

TG: You always have final say, of course.

TB: Of course! I like to think that we all do. And I make the first visit to the site to sketch out the general concept.

TG: Another thing I wanted to ask you about is the role of public relations in your practice, and in the profession in general. I notice you don't have a website, just a web page, and there isn't a huge amount available on you online. It seems that you rely on word of mouth referrals from clients and others in the profession, for instance the Swiss firm Herzog & de Meuron, which has referred projects to you. I like to think that this deficit of PR and published imagery relates to your earlier statement about the necessity for built architecture versus architecture on paper. I get the sense that what is most important to you is your relationship to the users of your buildings and not your relationship to the readers of magazines and websites. The cloud of hype and bullshit that surrounds contemporary architecture is often mistaken for architecture itself (we have the same problem in the art world). PR has a role in this, and fashion.

TB: When I'm lecturing to architecture students, I sometimes scan the room and wonder, Which one will it be who will *really* practice, who won't just follow what they see in architecture magazines—who will be the one? A huge amount of design is not done for a building's users but rather for the cover of a magazine.

TG: This relates back to my earlier questions on postwar Mexican architecture: I've always thought of Barragán as the first of the heavily media-driven architects, as someone who was really designing for publication, in collaboration with his photographer Salas Portugal. He was known to photograph his buildings mid-construction and make modifications based on how they appeared in print. He was living proof that designing for architecture magazines can create a career—he became the most famous Mexican architect abroad.

TB: You can be critical of that aspect of Barragán's work, but at the same time, he was a true artist, a brilliant creator of spaces—a sculptor of space, really. His built work is poetic and exhilarating to experience in person, to walk through. And ultimately, to me, this is what counts.

TG: At the same time, the one photograph you offer a visitor to your single web page is so incredibly beautiful—a house made up of modules clustered on the ridge of a densely forested hillside. It is totally seductive: in porn this kind of photo is called "the money shot."

TB: Yes, we couldn't resist; we called in Iwan Baan and did the whole thing.

TG: In this case, the documentation is like a freestanding artwork. Tell me about the house in the picture.

TB: There is this development, in the lower part of Cerro del Chiquihuite overlooking Monterrey, that has been divided into several plots where the children and grandchildren of one family have set up their homes. The land was divided into equal parcels and the family's will stipulated that each heir had to hire an architect to design them a house. I designed the house you see in the photograph for one of the grandsons. It is a concrete construction with exposed concrete finishes, and the plan is made up of a series of interlocking pentagon-shaped rooms. The client had wanted a house all on one level, but this would have required a huge amount of excavation and would have torn up the site. Instead, I gradually managed to convince them to follow the contours of the site, the house rising up to a bedroom wing as a sort of lookout at one end.

TG: It looks like metabolic architecture.

(*Bilbao winces at the sound of fashionable terminology.*)

TB: In fact, we're working on a second house for another heir not far from this one. Sixty-eight houses are planned, are in construction, or have been completed now, by both Mexican and international architects. Herzog & de Meuron, and Tadao Ando, have done houses there too.

TG: Incredible. This family has created an important piece of architectural

TANGASSI FUNERAL HOME, 2006–2012, San Luis Potosí, San Luis Potosí, Mexico. Photo by Iwan Baan.

patrimony: a kind of mini-Ordos. (*laughter*) So once again, in this house you are working with a different vocabulary of forms from the earlier projects we looked at. And again, going back to my first comment, these forms and materials don't seem in any way predetermined; it's as if they have been invented, totally fresh, for this specific project.…Speaking of Herzog & de Meuron, I remember you telling me you are collaborating with them on a project in France.

TB: Yes, they were invited to draw up the plan for an area on the island that makes up the city center of Lyon and is actually at the meeting point of two rivers. This area is known as the "La Confluence." The first block is now laid out, and will launch the first phase of a larger urban project. Herzog & de Meuron proposed us, and the client—the city of Lyon—asked us to do three buildings. This is a public-private collaboration with a developer in the middle who will build and sell apartments, but the city owns the land and is making the guidelines. The demographic mix was laid out in Herzog & de Meuron's master plan. We were given commissions for two public housing buildings and one for the free market, to be sold to a *bailleur*, who administers the rents.

TG: I passed through this area on a train early last week heading south of Lyon—the train seems to traverse a huge shopping mall, then the Coop Himmelb(l)au museum comes into view, but no sign of the new buildings you're designing.

TB: Not yet, we are breaking ground this coming year.

TG: What were the main challenges in this project? It might be interesting to examine this one in more detail.

TB: It was like a Tetris puzzle. On the one hand we had a set of standard city bylaws for access, fire exits, etcetera… general construction rules. Next we had a very strict set of sustainability guidelines, also from the city, related to energy saving, consumption, and performance. For them, this *îlot* is to be an example of how things should be done. After that there were the developer's demands; he is always focused on the bottom line. And, finally, we had the guidelines from the master planners, who were more focused on issues like volume. Many of these rules contradicted each other. It was a huge challenge.

TG: Were some of the city guidelines related to appearance, to blending in with the existing urban fabric?

TB: Their interest was that these new buildings look good together as a group, so there are many rules pertaining to their appearance. These buildings should relate to the old city better than the previous buildings that went up in the area. There were some rules for finishes, but the architects were also partly chosen because they would produce something harmonious. The rules were also more about the proportion of solid surfaces to glass, the use of natural materials over artificial ones…

TG: These rules also relate to sustainability.

TB: Yes, and they are much more rigorous in France than anywhere else we have worked. We have never been faced with so many rules and guidelines. And finally, on top of all these contrasting and contradicting rules, we needed to build remaining true to our own ideas.

We wanted to achieve something that would integrate our ideas rather than just solve all these many problems in a mechanical way (which is what a developer usually expects).

TG: So let's hear some of the ideas you managed to insert into the Tetris puzzle.

TB: In one of the public housing buildings we proposed making all the apartments split-level. You enter at mid-level and either go up or down; the different levels divide the public spaces from the private ones. This is a bit like a section you find in Mario Pani's housing complexes.

TG: You also find it in Pani's condominium building on Paseo de la Reforma in Mexico City. There's a scene in my video *Ciudad Moderna* where you see a couple, divorced and living in separate sections of an apartment in that building, walking away from each other after a dispute. Exiting the mid-level, one walks up and the other down to their separate domains.

TB: In this same building in Lyon we wanted to create loggias, or terraces, where you might encounter your neighbors. We wanted people to get to know their neighbors and start building a community. The developer complained that there would not be enough privacy but, in fact, these loggias are not shared. Each unit has privacy, but it's not totally cut off—they can connect to their neighbors if so desired.

In the other public housing building we couldn't do the split-level, so we asked ourselves what else we could offer the inhabitants. We decided to design all the apartments differently, to express an idea of individuality. Each one is unique, and you can tell them apart from the façade.

So the two buildings are on the same block as the free-market building, but there is this quite progressive European way of combining all the common areas: a very good landscape architect has designed a shared garden in the center of the block.

TG: You're describing quite a complex public-private collaboration here, and I know you have done public projects now in a number of countries. How do they compare?

TB: Working with a public client is completely different in different parts of the world. In Europe, working on public projects is much more restrained and serious. There are many contracts involved. In Mexico it's the opposite: nothing is on paper, and things aren't always done the way they are planned.

TG: Tell me about a public project in Mexico.

TB: Some years ago I was approached by the Ministry of Tourism for the state of Jalisco. They were interested in enhancing a major pilgrimage route to make it a year-round tourist destination rather than a path used exclusively during Holy Week. We walked the route of the pilgrimage, near Guadalajara, and realized that quite a bit of infrastructure for the pilgrims was needed. We wanted to make their lives a little easier while walking this route, by, for instance, being able to bring along their families, etcetera. It was also important that our project serve to reinforce the economies of the villages along the route. In the past, visitors would only come in Holy Week, and the rest of the year was dead. Our idea was to make the route a year-round attraction. Three million people have now walked on it.

TG: What were your specific solutions?

TB: For pilgrims and other visitors to use, we decided to make shelters, gathering places, food-preparation sites, toilets, emergency medical stations, and trash-collection points. We developed the idea of inviting different architects to make interventions. I call them "points of interest" (or points of reflection), but they can be used as spiritual places. They are little chapels, but we couldn't call them that because they're not consecrated.

The idea of inviting other architects came out of two earlier projects I participated in, both spearheaded by the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei: the Ordos 100 project, where young firms were invited to design houses for the new town of Ordos, Mongolia; and the Jinhua Architecture Park in China. Using these earlier projects as a model, we thought the intervention of other architects could enrich the pilgrimage route project. Our office did the master plan and two "points of interest", one in collaboration with Dellekamp Arquitectos from Mexico City. For all projects, the material of choice was concrete, as there weren't any other available materials in the area. The project was completed in 2008.

TG: I heard you will have some role in the MoMA show on Latin American architecture opening this spring in New York.

TB: I'm not in the show, as it covers work only up to the 1980s, before I started to practice. I've been invited to give a talk along with other contemporary Latin American architects. The idea is to discuss the current state of architecture in Latin America. In general, I think it's a good moment to be practicing in Latin American countries because I see them as places in the process of consolidation. This gives young architects a lot of opportunities to build their practices and do a lot of new work. At the same time, we need to be very creative because there isn't a lot of money to go around. This produces very ingenious solutions. We are working with different realities, but these resonate in a lot of other parts of the world, so people from outside are paying attention.