AAA Journal: The Castle

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A PROJECT BY TERENCE GOWER

The following artist's project is based on research in the Esther McCoy papers in the Archives of American Art. Terence Gower makes use of a selection from McCoy's interview with Mexican architect Francisco Artigas. In the accompanying essay, Gower uses the play aformat to dramatize McCoy's first encounter in 1970 with Artigas' recently built "Castle," shown in the two double-page photographs.

THE CASTLE

Esther McCoy

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Casa Artigas, exterior view, ca. 1970. Architect: Francisco Artigas. Photograph by Roberto and Fernando Luna, © Roberto and Fernando Luna.

SCENE ONE

Curtain Up.
Lights come up on the façade and forecourt of an Italianate castle, daytime. The architecture critic enters from left stage with a tape recorder and microphone.

Esther McCoy: (*gazing at the façade while speaking into microphone*) The tower, a view of the tower…

It is… a square tower with hipped roof… it is about 70 feet high. Narrow, round-headed windows facing south-west…

(*Moving towards the entry*) The loggia–the entrance with glazing on both sides–about 200 feet wide… (*pause*) A doorway, 8 feet wide, of 12-inch timber…

(*Opening front door and peering inside*) The passage is covered with wood, with glass at the sides…(*pause*) Planting both sides… columns of old beams carved with acanthus.

SCENE TWO

Castle interior, afternoon.

Esther McCoy: (*Turning 360 degrees, speaking into microphone*) It looks closed but it is passageways between hexagonal spaces…

(*Looking up*) These beams are from an old church and the brackets are from an old house. Beams… with cord detailing…

(*Stepping through the door leading to terrace*) Outside, a cold area… a barranca off the terrace…

(*Coming back into the Castle's main hall*) The central hexagonal space: a throw-away space, beautiful, with a small Diana, is it a Diana? No, it isn't. A fountain in the center… A wood paving fanning out from the fountain…

(*Crossing to living room*) The living room, the same hex with sofas on four sides steps down on the other two, one leading up to the fire place.

Switches off tape recorder.

Lights Fade.

Casa Artigas, interior view, ca. 1970. Architect: Francisco Artigas. Photograph by Roberto and Fernando Luna.

The photographs on the preceding pages show the home that the Mexican architect Francisco Artigas designed for himself near the end of his life. The house was begun in 1968 and completed in 1970. The text is an extract from a five-hour interview of Artigas conducted by the American architecture critic Esther McCoy, whose papers are at the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art. McCoy was a regular critic for the Los Angeles publication Art and Architecture and was instrumental to the planning and dissemination of the Case Study House program launched by the magazine in the late 1940s. She was a staunch advocate of modernist architectural ideology and a guiding force for the establishment of those ideas on the West Coast. McCoy also traveled frequently to Mexico and other Latin American countries, reporting back on the integration and sophistication of the modernist movement in those places.

Mexico was fertile ground for modernist architecture in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. While the United States was adhering to a Soviet-style official architecture, Mexico—looking to express a progressive new identity after its revolution—had gone entirely modern. Starting in the late 1940s, public building projects—government buildings, schools, hospitals, and public housing—were designed according to the logical economy of a stripped-down functionalism. Interestingly, this desire for an expression of modernity extended beyond public architecture to the realm of the wealthy and powerful. Francisco Artigas was an architect who was happy to design private modernist villas and luxury hotels for this sector.

Casa Gómez, El Pedregal de San Angel, Mexico City. Architect: Francisco Artigas. Photograph by Roberto and Fernando Luna.

The majority of Artigas' projects were houses built for clients in Mexico City's most exclusive suburb, Los Jardines del Pedregal de San Angel, laid out on the south edge of the city by Mexico's great real estate speculator Luis Barragán. These photogenic masterpieces (for instance, Casa Gómez, 1953, pictured left) made Artigas an icon of Mexican modernism. Esther McCoy—like this artist —was an admirer of these houses and their creator. Pedregal is a lava landscape, a brutal and beautiful setting for residential architecture. The introduction of Artigas' man-made slabs into this landscape creates a very pleasurable visual contrast. McCoy was so taken with Artigas' Pedregal houses that she wrote the introduction to the architect's enormous 1972 monograph. (Curiously no reference is made to this book in her published bibliographies.)

McCoy's interview took place just after Artigas had shifted his architectural style from modernism to a kind of fantasy historicism, evident in the pictures of his own house on the preceding pages. This shift was a capricious one, not unlike the modernist-historicist shift in "styles" that occurred in the United States several years later and became known as "Postmodernism." McCoy the modernist spends much time during the interview searching for a justification for this shift, in perhaps one of the first twentieth-century examples of a modernist critic or architect being faced with a New Architecture that isn't based on a grand theory. In Artigas' new work there is no manifesto, no justification, no larger plan based on a new concept of social engineering: The architect was simply bored with modernism. A kind of crisis registers in McCoy's voice as Artigas calmly discusses his principal inspiration for the new house: the Robin Hood movies he saw as a boy. He confesses that since boyhood he had always wanted to live in Robin Hood's castle, and now at last, he could turn his dream into reality.

Francisco Artigas was born in 1916. When he was six years old, a dashing Douglas Fairbanks hit the screens as the protagonist in the costly Hollywood extravaganza Robin Hood. Sixteen years later Hollywood released a second Robin Hood film, this time with Errol Flynn opposite Olivia de Havilland's Maid Marian. It's possible that both films fanned the flames of Artigas' Robin Hood obsession, and both are interchangeable in a way. In both films, most of the nature scenes (Robin Hood's adventures in Sherwood Forest making up the bulk of the action) were filmed outdoors in the Los Angeles area. All interior shots were filmed in a Hollywood studio, mostly scenes of revelry or pageantry in the case of the earlier film or interminable swordfights in the later one. All these scenes take place in fake castle interiors or courtyards.

The design of the castle in the films is allegedly based on Nottingham Castle, the key site of the Robin Hood legend. The

Photograph of cassette tapes with Ester McCoy's 1970 description of Francisco Artigas' home.

aesthetic provenance of Artigas' castle is therefore an English castle as interpreted by a Hollywood set designer, later filtered through the imagination of a young boy. I should mention that this is in no way an unusual inspiration for a Mexican house. In the 1930s, certain of Mexico City's architects-to-the-elite sought inspiration in Hollywood. While most architects were exploring art deco forms, these architects were looking at the Beverly Hills houses of Hollywood stars, built in what is known in the United States as Mission Style. These mansions incorporated the decorative details of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Colonial missions. This elaborate Spanish Colonial style, practiced by Hollywood set decorators freelancing as architects, was reimported to Mexico, where it became known as "Hollywood Baroque." All of this is a testament to the density and richness of Mexican culture, seemingly able to absorb and digest just about every cultural assault without altering its own character.

But why would Artigas choose to build a stone castle so late in his life and career? My hypothesis is that he built it because could. What I did not mention in my introduction to this essay was that the technological aspects of modernism never really flourished in Mexico, a country with a very large pool of skilled building labor, which made the mechanization of the building trade redundant. For example, in the 1950s it probably would have been less expensive to have workmen handcraft an I-beam out of standard steel profiles than to fabricate it through an industrial process. The spectacular concrete architecture of Felix Candela was probably only possible in Mexico, handcrafted and tested by an army of workers. With this huge pool of artisan labor, wealthy patrons in Mexico have been able to afford to build any structure out of any material, including castles of solid stone. In Mexico, Artigas had the luxury of rejecting the apparent economy of modern building technology and indulging his childhood fantasies to the fullest. He could incorporate handcut cantera stone walls, handmade tile floors and roofs, and handcarved wooden beams. It is just possible that rejecting modern building technology could have been the easier route to take.

What Francisco Artigas' project demonstrates, and what seems to slowly dawn on Esther McCoy in her interview, is that modernism in Mexico's elite private sector was often practiced as a style, symbolic of sophistication and novelty but divorced from the progressive social philosophy at the heart of the movement (and clearly at work in Mexico's public sector, resulting in good housing, schools, and hospitals for many of the less fortunate). In McCoy's interview, Artigas stresses that his ideas on the distribution of functions, exposures, and siting had not changed at all between his "modern" and his late work, nor were his ideas significantly different from those of premodern (Colonial) architecture. In other words, it was only the envelope that had changed. What I detect in the tone of McCoy's voice in the tapes is a gradual realization that perhaps Artigas, an icon of modernism, was

The Adventures of Robin Hood, *1938*

not a modernist and perhaps never was. The question needed to be asked: Was the modernist functionalism in his early work largely some kind of aesthetic apparatus designed to display the status of his clients?

There is a certain drama to this scenario—the edifice of modernism crumbling before the eyes of the idealistic architecture critic. The drama is especially acute when McCoy lays eyes on the Artigas "Castle" for the first time. She rolls the tape and begins the peculiar soliloquy I've reprinted here in a tone of voice reminiscent of a news report from a disaster area. It is as if she is witnessing the demolition of an ideal, expressed paradoxically by the castle's solid stones and sturdy beams. She is taking audio notes, as she clearly is accustomed to doing as she tours a building for the first time, but the various specs she is listing—"A doorway, eight feet wide . . . wood paving fanning out . . ."—are colored by a slightly frantic tone of disbelief. Like the narration of Joseph Conrad's protagonist as he travels up the river and into the Heart of Darkness, Esther McCoy's report sounds like that of a first witness to the horrors of a terrifying new Postmodern world. ✪