The "Bosque de la Esperanza" by Giancarlo Mazzanti and the Social Moment of Colombian Architecture

Daniel Cardoso Llach

"Bosque de la Esperanza" project By Giancarlo Mazzanti, and the Social Moment of Colombian Architecture: Lessons on *realarchitektur**

The sports center Bosque de la Esperanza (a name meaning Forest of Hope), at Altos de Cazucá, designed by the office of Barranquilla-based architect Giancarlo Mazzanti, and funded by the Pies Descalzos Foundation, which belongs to Shakira (who is also from Barranquilla), and by the Spanish NGO Ayuda en Acción, has incited radically different reactions between the international press and the local critical scene. While international media has complimented the contemporary language of the project and its alleged role as an agent of "social inclusion", the conservative critical scene of local architecture has been relentless against the building and against all of Mazzanti's work, portraying his buildings as unoriginal, insensitive to the context in which they are located and indulgent with the ego of their designer. In this building, two ways of understanding the practice of architecture and the construction of the public sphere come together. For some, it reaffirms a heroic vision of architecture as a catalyst for social change, while others see it as a waste of resources and an ode to the vanity of the architect. How can such critical dissonance be overcome?

A Digestible Vanguard

The international press has reproduced, sometimes literally, the emancipatory language with which the architect's office advertises the project,

Figure 1
Forest (Bosque), in Altos de Cazucá. The building contrasts with the informal housing that surrounds it

Source: http://www.fastcodesign.com/1669091/shakira-builds-a-canopy-of-trees-in-a-blighted-colombian-suburb.

* I coined the term realarchitektur as an architectural equivalent to the German realpolitik, used (sometimes pejoratively) to refer to political and diplomatic practices based on pragmatism rather than ideology.

sidelining any analysis. The Forest of Hope (hereinafter the Forest) is presented without any explanation except for some photos and a video of smiling children filmed by the architects themselves, and heralded as an agent of "social inclusion" and as giving "identity" to a place that —the media presumes— does not have any. Thus, *Domus* magazine presents it as a "project for the community and the social change" ("Bosque de la Esperanza", 2012), the Frameweb portal describes the project as "a beacon of hope in a very poor community" (Webb, 2012), and the design portal Co.Design presents it as "a set of trees taken from a space-age video game", an "uplifting" project that provides the residents with "shelter from their desolate surroundings" and (again) "a beacon that illuminates a better time" (Lanks, 2012). The Italian magazine *Abitare,* meanwhile, features Mazzanti as an architect of "innovative thinking", and describes his architectural practice as "a way to bring together design concepts to achieve *social inclusion*" (*Abitare,* 2011, my emphasis). In a current exhibition at the Instituto Cervantes in Chicago, works from Mazzanti's office and other Colombian firms are shown under the same light, as signs of a national transformation signed by a revival of the public sphere (Gómez, n.d.).

To be fair, the trade of these publications is not criticism but the "curated" presentation of projects that are considered to have architectural value because of their aesthetic quality. When speaking about Mazzanti and other Colombian architects, the story that gets to be told is invariably that of contemporary architectural languages that arise at the margins of the developed world to redeem and empower marginalized communities through bold geometries and ecological metaphors.

Thanks to projects such as the Forest, Latin America remains, in the overall architectural imagination, as a tropical stronghold of the uto-pian project of modernism, with the cities of Bogotá and Medellín as urban laboratories of sorts, committed to social and spatial transformation. With the developed world economies mired in recession and unemployment, this story (about contemporary architecture mediating "social" discourse in emerging economies) is reassuring and easily digested by a global audience.

Local Critique

Nationally, however, the Forest —as Mazzanti's work in general— has been received with far less enthusiasm. The position of architect Guillermo Fischer illustrates the repairs of the national architectural *establishment* regarding the work of Mazzanti. In a bitter post in the architectural criticism blog *Torre de Babel,* Fischer (2011a) points out what he sees as Mazzanti's gimmicky design process, which uses foreign stylistic conventions in what Fischer calls "direct copy". The same author suggests that the architecture of Mazzanti and his team is not "authentic" or "local" —a criticism that architecture workshop professors often deliver to students who have not studied carefully the context in which their buildings will stand.

In another column, Fischer (2011b) goes further and denounces a group of "media architects", which includes Mazzanti, accusing them of "monopolizing the competitions [of the Colombian Society of Architects] and turning them into their business" (as if there was something ethically reprehensible in winning competitions and doing business). For further reference, on the website of *Escala* magazine there is a judicious and enriching discussion on the occasion of the Sixth Architecture Biennale, in which Fischer and other prominent voices of the national scene share their reservations about the prize awarded to Mazzanti for his design of the España Public Library Park, in Medellín (Fischer et al., n.d.).

Other, more mundane critiques suggest that projects like the Forest are a waste of resources, and that for a community with great needs, such as Altos de Cazucá, an ambitious sculptural project is unwarranted and only serves the ego of its architect. At the *Domus* website, a user says: "More than an interesting deck, [the project] is a pathetic attempt to intervene in a part of the city that really needs architectural work[s] for its people, not to magnify the ego of the architect" (Bosque de la Esperanza, 2012).

John Eliécer Cuenca Castrillón also points out the high cost of the project (over a thousand million pesos): "So expensive! [...] With the money spent on this proposal, which is more decorative than useful, something more suited to the needs of the sector could have been built, something that could be modern but without the fuss" (Bosque de la Esperanza, 2012).

Lessons on *Realarchitektur*

For most of those who have raised their voices in the critical sphere of national architecture, what Mazzanti does is not architecture but self-promotion. His clients are not the people inhabiting his projects, but the architectural magazines that show his work, swell his portfolio and set him forth as a celebrity of international design. The apparent ability of Mazzanti and his team to market their practice and win contests is seen as a sort of violation of the professional code. Such critique assumes that architecture design is incompatible with commercial success, and that the "real" architect should *selflessly* seek the public good. This conception, —more European than American —of the architect as "gentleman", does not allow space for *marketing* or self-promotion (activities that, in contrast, architects in the United States have exercised unabashedly) and only accepts those referents that conform to certain rules of etiquette, style and rhetoric.

Mazzanti, on the other side, is an example of *realarchitektur* that is not ashamed to seek commercial advantage in its work, to play with the formal languages of contemporary architecture (folds, modular aggregation, expressive use of the structure) as well as with the rhetorical ones (such as "inclusion", the mandate of sustainability and a somewhat unexamined celebration of the public sphere) without bowing down before the provincialism of the local *status quo*. The criticisms to Mazzanti, based on his alleged lack of authenticity, betray a certain *costumbrismo* that dominates part of the academic discussion on architecture in Colombia, selectively and deliberately exaggerating the role of originality in design in order to define the limits of an ideologically correct architecture.

One could ask: Would the critics be less bothered if Mazzanti and his team had copied Salmona rather than Koolhaas? Would the Forest be seen as more "local" if its structure was made of *guadua* bamboo instead of steel? Would they be more convinced by the promotional rhetoric of the project if, instead of the organic metaphor of the "forest", the architects had resorted to justifications based on the spatiality of the savanna's colonial house?

The argument for authenticity opens more questions than it helps to answer. Is not architecture design, like all creative practices, a set of references and citations shaped by circumstance? Or, as Germán Tellez wrote in the discussion quoted above: "Why this fear of copy and this military dictatorship of originality and of the inflated, boastful ego? Are we really demigods?". Some of the utilitarian criticisms, in turn, reveal a class bias in assuming that whatever is made in a "poor" neighborhood should exhibit certain qualities (and not others), the most important of which is to look as being "for the poor". In its extreme form, this bias means that any deck

not covered in zinc tile is sumptuary, and it fore-closes the potential transforming power of an ambitious intervention (public or not) in the urban space.

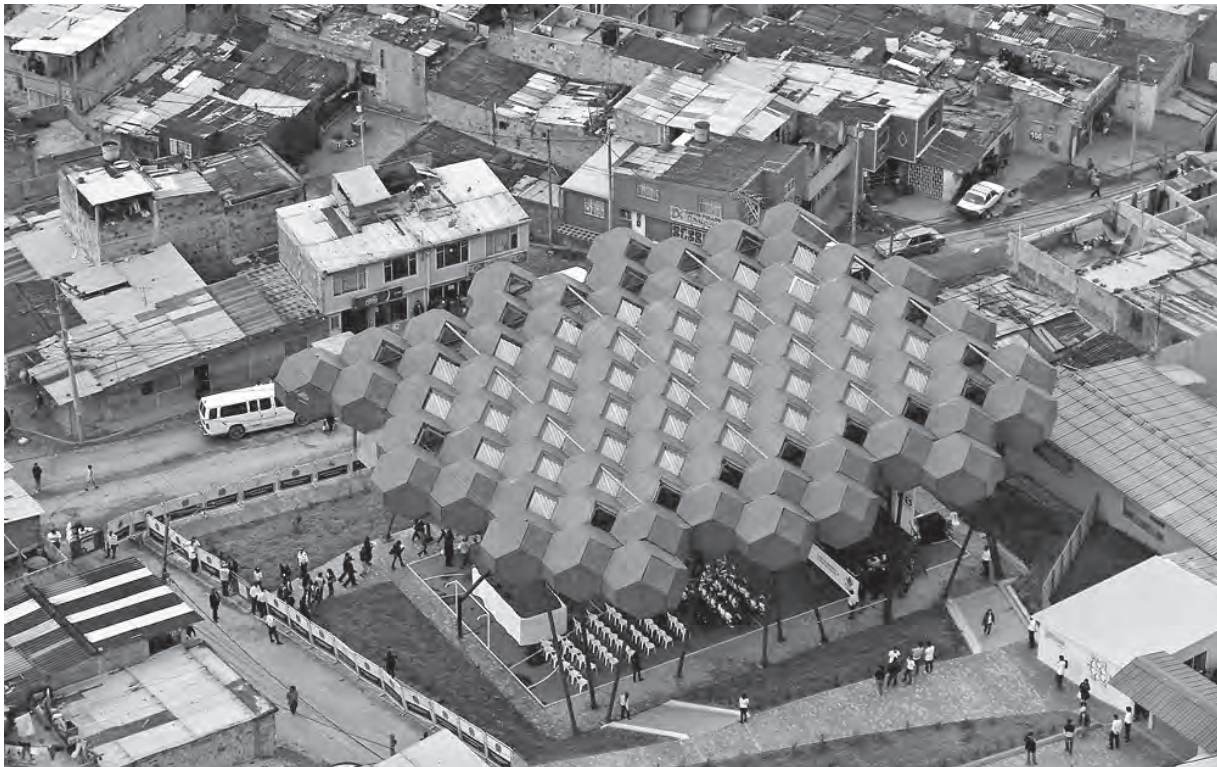## As a Sports Center, the Forest of Hope is a Good Metaphor

As desirable as it is to avoid *costumbrismos*, it is also important to give room in the critique to recognize management and design efforts that aim to positively affect their environment. In the case of the Forest, the critics should not ignore that its funding does not come from public money, but from NGOs. A useful critique should aim its focus on the specific architecture of the project, its management and its urban context rather than relying on the automatic application of utilitarian dogmas and local customs, or in the uncritical repetition of the

narratives of social transformation prepared by stakeholders.

The image of the deck rising in a mountainous, park-less, low-income and underserved Bogotá neighborhood is provocative, and its net impact on it might be positive. However, as happens with other projects designed by Mazzanti and his team, such as the Transmilenio bridges, the Forest is over-structured. The sports center, which cost about one billion dollars, is actually a court covered with a three-dimensional structure composed of dodecahedral modules supported by inclined steel pipes seeking to give the fluctuating impression of a set of trees. While being a sports court, the deck is also expected to harbor neighborhood community events (Figure 2).

The deck modules have lamps that illuminate the project at night, but the design does not provide

Figure 2
Collecting the balls that fall off the court could take days

Source: http://www.fastcodesign.com/1669091/shakira-builds-a-canopy-of-trees-in-a-blighted-colombian-suburb.

any solution to the foreseeable falling of the balls down the steep slope where the project is located. The density of the three-dimensional metal mesh modules of the deck makes it unnecessarily heavy (both physically and visually) in relation to its function of shading and lighting an open space, which fuels the sensation of waste.

The three-dimensional structures evoked by the project —Richard Buckminster Fuller's space trusses— owe their elegance to lightness and structural efficiency, but on the deck of the Forest of Hope this efficiency is sacrificed in favor of the dubious metaphor of the Forest. This is an expensive and not entirely justified poetic license, and only time and people will tell if it manages to become meaningful in its neighborhood context.

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Daniel Cardoso Llach
daniel.cardoso.llach@gmail.com