

# A HOVEL IS NOT A HOUSE

A text by Juan Antonio Álvarez Reyes

Some years ago, Ángel González wrote a article (1) in which he affirmed that an apartment is not a house. If we accepted his argument, based on his idea of habitation, we would probably not be able to extend that statement to mean that a hovel is even less: “the idea of a house is not yet a house, but it is better to have something, no matter how small, dirty and rickety, than to go to along with that ideology, the false idea of continuity, according to which tenure. A hovel is certainly closer to the idea of a house than to the idea of a primitive hut. In his reflections on the origin of the first house (2), Joseph Rykwert stated that man’s first habitation is generally believed to have been a structure of provisional supports leaning against a rock surface, used by early man to protect himself from the elements and his many enemies.

This idea of primitive hut clearly ties in with the reality of a modern shanty: precarious, provisional, fragile... vis-à-vis the hostility of the *milieu*. As Rykwert shows, the idea of rustic and a return to roots has underlain architecture, particularly house building, down through history, hence the importance of the archaeology of the primeval hut. The *Sommerfeld house* is a good example of the “back to roots” idea; it was designed by Walter Gropius and Adolf Meyer, with assistance from Josef Albers (stained glass) and Marcel Breuer (furniture), among others. It was the first collective building of the movement’s manifesto: “It will combine architecture, sculpture, and painting in a single form”.

And they really did it, just as Jesús Palomino has done it in modern times with his series of coloured hovels, in which architecture is there as an archetype, sculpture as a representation in the artistic space (gallery or museum) and painting is expanded as a field of colour. Critics Mariano Navarro and Pablo Llorca (3) have developed the idea that the fundamental feature of Palomino’s work is that third feature, the pictoric element. They are probably right, but one should not ignore, the unity of the arts (architecture, sculpture and painting), albeit without the visionary or utopian component of the Bauhaus, in keeping with a sceptical, post-modern era like the present. We should, in fact, focus more on the dominant feature in Palomino’s works and highlight the main idea: rather than focusing on the pictoric aspect, we should focus more on the decorative aspects, as evidenced clearly in this exhibition, which combines photograph of his first hovel in Poble Nou with drawings and collages. The artist himself has written (4) that, in parallel to his sculptures, he always develops collages with coloured paper and varied motifs, particularly landscapes, plants, and geometric shapes: “They work very well with the sculptures and contribute to a better understanding of the work on display”. Moreover, Luis Francisco Pérez (5) has highlighted the particular beauty of these collages, which have the same quality as the paint used in the houses he has been making since 1998. That is to say, in the comparison between the vibrant colour that Palomino applies to his constructions and collages, there is a tradition that can only be formalistic.

In his first book “*Problems of style: foundations for a history of ornament*” (6), Aloïs Riegl examined the evolution of certain plant motifs down through history in connection with various styles, and highlighted that each style had a corresponding shape due to an act of will. We should not forget that ancient ornamentation (the plant

motifs are just another coincidence) formed part of a programme that integrated architecture with sculpture (and occasionally painting) and that ornamentation can also be seen in how Palomino's uses colour in his huts and in the plant and geometric patterns in his colleges.

Within this search for a new building to combine the trinity of the arts (as laid down in the Bauhaus manifesto), it is advisable here to replace one of the three: while keeping architecture and sculpture, we should replace painting with ornamentation.

This ornamental quality of Palomino's pictures is merely an artistic will arising from the style of our era. This exhibition highlights this fact quite naturally by combining document (7) with the trials or games, highlighting the value of ornamentation or, if you wish, of decoration in modern art.

Palomino himself has spoken about the use of colour in his constructions as a factor for structuring space and as a means of drawing attention to the painting; although he goes even further by trying to imbue it with a social content.

Hence also the importance, after seeing the form of its meaning, of the house as an allegory of life and humanity, simultaneous with the need to decorate and furnish it. Regarding the house and its detailed description (as a back story of life and its modelling), Mario Praz (8) describes the construction (decoration) of his home, room by room, as a means of recounting his experiences.

However, there are paradoxes, as observed in the photographs of the redevelopment of Poble Nou, in an empty site, where a hovel leans against the wall of a tumbledown building. These paradoxes seek to avoid personal references by encroaching on the territory of others.

According to Marc Auge's definition (9) of non-places, an empty plot is in transition between the past and the future, whereas its present is a transitional space prepared to be different. Accordingly, deep down, the green and yellow hut is striking there precisely because of the ornamentation, the colour: it is not an extrapolation of the reality to the artistic but actually the opposite. In this use of ornamentation (now deprecated despite widespread use throughout history), we should not forget some modern examples, such as much of the work of Marjetica Portc, which is closely related to Palomino's work, and the specific case of Anri Sala's "*Damm i Colori*". In the latter case, the artist used colour to transform the Albanian town of which he is Mayor (10): art (or, rather, some of its applications, such as colour, decoration and ornamentation) distorts reality by engaging it. The dusty communal apartment blocks on run-down streets (11) were transformed with just a coat of paint.

To quote Palomino: "Sometimes colour is all the poor have". (12)

If an apartment is not a house a communal apartment is even less so, in the same way as a hovel isn't either, despite the evocation of the primitive hut of Adam's house in paradise.

## References:

- (1) Ángel González: “Donde se asegura que un piso no es una casa”, in the catalogue of the exhibition “*La casa: su idea*”. Comunidad de Madrid, 1997. Reprinted in *El Resto*. Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao and Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2000.
- (2) Joseph Rykwert: “*On Adam’s house in paradise*”. The MIT Press, 1981.
- (3) Mariano Navarro: “*Palomino y la casa de los pobres*”. *El Mundo Cultural* supplement. 14-3-2001. Pablo Llorca: “Una casa en el cielo”. *El Periódico del Arte*, sigue 51. Abril 2001.
- (4) See text in the Jesus Palomino exhibition catalogue. *Casas, vallas y túneles*. Sevilla Caja San Fernando. Sevilla 2003.
- (5) Luis Francisco Pérez: “*Jesús Palomino*”. *Revista Lápiz*, issue 148. December 1998.
- (6) First published in 1893. There is a 1993 English translation published by Princeton University.
- (7) Quoted from a conversation with Francisco del Río contained in (4): “Since construction has a limited life-span, it is important to photograph them so as to keep a record”.
- (8) Mario Praz: *The house of life*. Oxford University Press.
- (9) Marc Augé: *Non-place: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Verso 1995. “If a place can be defined as a place of identity, relational and historical, then a space that cannot be defined as a space of identity, either relational or historical, will define a non-place”.
- (10) Anri Sala: “*Dammi i colori*”. DVD, colour, 2003. See also Postverité. Murcia. Centro Párraga. 2003.
- (11) Susan Buck-Morss: *Dreamworld and catastrophe. The passing of mass utopia in East and West*. The MIT Press, 2000. (The Communal apartment arose in the 1920’s as a pragmatic solution to the need for housing. Although all Soviet citizens had to be assured a dwelling, since there were pre-revolutionary buildings, the question arose as to how to distribute them. The law provided a formal approach, under which individuals were to receive at least ten square meters, and families at least thirteen square meters.
- (12) Conversation with Francisco del Río (ibid.)