

GUN Architects interview: Jorge Godoy and Lene Nettelbeck

CSH: How did you set up GUN Architects?

LN: GUN exists since 2010, but it didn't really start as an office. I came to Chile from Germany and it wasn't clear for how long I would stay; Jorge was teaching and was interested to focus more on the practice and take some distance away from academia. Suddenly, we had a small project in our hands and started working from home but not really formalizing anything. That first project was the Naturalist Pavilion; this was really something we just started to model at home on the kitchen table and it then went on site. We had to really get involved into the project also as builders because of the budget and the innovative condition of this structure where, nobody knew how to weave bamboo bars, so we were there, on site, testing. In those terms, it was a very spontaneous start to the practice, there was no decision, 'yes, I'll go to Chile and we'll start an office'.

After that, we were invited to present a proposal for the Young Architect's Program International in Chile (YAP CONSTRUCTO), where we fortunately won the competition. That situation really changed the whole office concept, fundamentally because was the first chance to put our methods in practice working with other people and developing a large-scale public project. Right now, we are getting more consolidated as a team and with a long-term research agenda in Chile and Germany. Somehow we are more official but it still feels like we're just starting - that's the nice part.

CSH: How many of your projects would you consider temporary?

JG: Three of our projects can be considered as temporary: The Water Cathedral and Rainforest were both originally designed as temporary structures with a clear duration and standing times on the public space. On the other side, there is the Naturalist Pavilion, a bamboo structure that is gradually disappearing and getting absorbed by nature. A kind of long-term temporary building, where different bits and pieces of the original built structure started to collapse and to fall apart getting replaced by the growing plants that interweaved the original structure.

CSH: Let's talk about the Naturalist Pavilion, how did the project come about and what was the concept for it?

JG: The Naturalist Pavilion was built just after a huge earthquake we had in 2010; it was really one of the strongest the country has suffered from in the last 100 years. Many buildings were destroyed and it showed that we have quite serious building deficiencies. In our case, a family farm located close from the epicenter, had a garden pavilion fabricated with local traditional materials such as heavy clay roof tiles. The structure couldn't resist the seismic movements and collapsed due to its own weight and excess of rigidity. That situation turned in to an opportunity for us to test new materials, lighter and more flexible ones. So using Chilean bamboo or *coligüe*, was a quite good, cheap and novel option, that in contrast to the previous edification allowed us to create a more elastic woven bamboo structure, where the weaving patterns had all its parts interconnected as a 3D mesh. This *monostructure* could dynamically response to seismic movements, absorbing and releasing ground vibrations.

The pavilion was built as a series of arches with 2.500 horizontally interweaved bamboo bars that ranged from 2.5m to 4m length; it was a layering system to create a bonded

surface, with difference thicknesses and different degrees of permeability for the management of natural light.

Over time the vegetation that we planted next to the arches started to also interweave through them and after two or three years the pavilion started to become run down, just because of natural conditions. It's still standing but some bits and pieces have collapsed, the owner didn't take such good care of it. What's nice though, is that the vegetation is getting stronger and thicker, it's taking the shape of the arches; it's interesting to think that at some point the whole pavilion could disappear and the nature would still be standing, completely interweaved. It shows another kind of temporary pavilion that was not planned to be temporary, but ended up as a long-term temporary.

CSH: The Water Cathedral in 2011 was part of the Young Architect's Program (YAP) in Santiago, can you tell me a bit more about that project and the process of the programme?

JG: The Water Cathedral came as an invitation, I don't really know how it works in the rest of the world, but in Chile you must be invited to show your work and then you enter the competition with four other offices or architects. There was an international jury, including Barry Bergdoll from the New York MoMA, who chose the winner. Especially here, they wanted to bring back one of the essential points that MoMA PS1 first started to deal with fifteen years ago, which was water.

With our proposal, with the Water Cathedral, we wanted to give presence to the water, thinking about the dry weather in Santiago, especially in the summertime. Conceptually it also crossed over with some of our previous material research and academic work I did in the north of Chile about fog collection in the desert. Then we took it as a chance to develop in an urban scale and environment, a dripping structure, which was this canopy built out of singular textile stalactites that work as mediators or interfaces between a water network placed over the stalactites and a ground surface populated with a topography of concrete stalagmites which worked as water collectors, sitting places and children playground. The project created the possibility of having differentiated dynamic atmospheres dependent on the length and density of stalactites, changing and shaping different types of spaces and environmental conditions.

CSH: So how did that project turn into the Rainforest pavilion at the Architectural Association in London?

JG: That's a long story. After we built the Water Cathedral, we got several after effects, there was a lot of the project around in different publications, and we decided at that time to participate in the Emerging Architecture awards organized by the Architectural Review in London. The Water Cathedral was highly commended, it was quite well received, so we went to London for the Awards exhibition opening and gave a lecture where we presented the project. For us the UK has been an opening space, a platform where started to create connections with the Architectural Association and some other people and institutions. I studied at the AA but after I finished was pretty much detached from them, I had never really come back to the School in the last eight years. We had a meeting with Brett Steele, he really liked the project and then the people in the exhibition team, which is led by Vanessa Norwood, were really enthusiastic. At the beginning it was just going to be a small exhibition, but then Vanessa decided it had to be stronger; she was quite ambitious about having the atmosphere of the Water Cathedral - the immersive condition that it had. That was a new challenge for us, in terms of context, fundraising and finding the way of how to make it.

Something important to mention regarding the project evolution is that the original London version of the Water Cathedral was not really meant to be a pavilion, but a cascade on the front of the school. We worked a long time on that, months actually, it was a beautiful project, it was really a symbol for the facade - it was going to be a dripping cascade of 15 meters height covering 36 Bedford Square. Everything was going fairly well with the engineers and Camden Council in terms of permits. At the very last minute we got a message from English Heritage saying that the project however temporary would cause visual harm to the consistent terrace of late 18th century grade I listed buildings in Bedford Square

LN: Even though it was temporary, they were very concerned about Bedford Square, as London's finest and best preserved Georgian Square. Saying that the installation, however interesting as a piece of art in its own right, breaks this visual consistency and draws attention away from the historic buildings. So we would need to demonstrate public benefits that outweigh the harm, but due to our time frame their advice would be to consider building the installation in Bedford Square as has been traditionally done.

JG: Even if we were not touching at all the building – we had a full scaffolding system on top of the roof designed by AKT, so the facade was completely untouched – English Heritage had a strong concern as well about triggering something that could later be repeated on other buildings in Bedford Square.

LN: That change of direction was very challenging basically we had to start from scratch, reformulating our design for a new installation that had to stand on the street. Meaning new constraints and public regulations, such as the impossibility to lay anything in terms of foundations in the ground so there was no chance to replicate what the Water Cathedral did in Santiago. However, facing this situation and going for a new installation, opened new research paths and positive effects.

JG: The Rainforest for us it brought a full new issue in relation to public space, even if it was built in an area of London that is full of spatial regulations and restrictions people really accepted and used it. For example, we had a ground of stones and in the beginning there was a lot of fear from the neighbors that their cars were going to be scratched or the windows were going to be destroyed, people were afraid of the textiles burning, or the pond getting full of rubbish, but absolutely nothing like that happened. That opened for us a full new thinking, when you do something that the community accepts and likes it, it doesn't get destroyed. Even if we saw some people sleeping there over night, there was never any kind of violent action against the project. That went over the whole policy of oversafety that is covering London at the moment.

CSH: Is it important to you how people engage with the project?

JG: Yes, we had for example one meeting with the Bloomsbury Association which is related to Bedford Square, they wanted to know who we are; they took the Rainforest

pavilion quite different to previous ones, other pavilions were much lighter or sculptural, but for them the Rainforest engaged more environmental and public space dimensions.

LN: It was for them a pavilion they felt that you can be part of because it's not just sculptural, you can go within it, I think that was, for them, the interesting part, it was not just there to be observed, you could use it and experience as a small new atmosphere in central London.

CSH: So what happened to the structure afterwards, did it have an afterlife?

JG: The structure is now stored somewhere out of London in a barn, the scaffolder took the structure, it's still our piece but it's not so clear what is going to happen to it.

CSH: Going back to the Young Architect's Program, do you think you would have been able to do such a project without that initiative?

JG: Definitely not. We were able to build quite a big intervention, it was 700 sqm, it had about 3,500 stalactites, and it was also kind of an intervention into thinking about the Chilean context, turning thinking around that it's not possible; there's not a culture of installations or temporary buildings. Without the MoMA program, no way could we have done something similar.

LN: The nice thing about the MoMA programme is that it focuses on young people, there are some pavilions around but they're from well-known offices, mainly for fairs or for creating images for companies. This was more experimental, I think without this programme I don't know how something like this could happen, also outside of University or academic research, meaning that the general public can access it and evaluate it and experience it. That's also something very interesting, it gives you feedback straight away, it's not a workshop you do on a university campus. That's what is nice about the AA, it's within the AA, but it is also part of the city and urban life.

Of course, the programme pushes you in a really very short time to develop it, I think if you make it as a long-term research and it's over years, you have time to find money and make prototypes. I mean, 700 sq m after five months, it's very big. Also the history of the MoMA PS1 helps you **to get interest within the architectural** world, it's not something in Santiago, Chile, 'who cares?', it's part of a very well-known programme. It was, of course, for us very helpful.

JG: Regarding the timeframe, it forces you to be very concrete and pragmatic, it's like one chance to put your ideas in action.

CSH: Do you think there should be more programmes like it, is the profession doing enough to help this type of architecture?

JG: We think definitely there should be more programmes like it, I'm not so sure if the problem of having more or less of them, it's just regarding the profession, I think it has to do also with some other agents or actors, the city probably has to be much more involved, private or public institutions should engage more with this issue; temporary structures or temporary pavilions are not exceptional pieces, they could help get new ideas for city development or planning.

Architects could be more interested in that and participate more in that, but if there's not support from higher up and the state, it's basically not possible to go further, money is always a big issue. Even if it's really small, you have to work really hard in order to get something. In our case, the AA, the Chilean Ministry of Culture and the British Council played a fundamental role providing us not just the money but also the urban and cultural context for this kind of interventions.

CSH: What are you working on at the moment?

LN: We're working on a long-term project, we started it three or four years ago. It's located 500 km up north from Santiago in a coastal enclave just on the edge where the desert starts. The main target is to build a self-sufficient community on a territory of 100 hectare of post-agricultural land that used to be part of an old Hacienda. Right now we're implementing the first small constructions on site, starting with the first house where the manager and his family will live, plus some roads, water pipes, footpaths and observation platforms.

As it's a sustainable project, we're not directly connected to any city around, it's an area near to the beach but with a strong rural context. It will start as a cluster of 6 houses and gradually will increase its urban density, population and infrastructure. We had the chance to participate from the beginning and being protagonists of the strategic vision behind this project, where literally everything has to be created. We have been dealing with very basic things, such as legal issues or permits, and on the other side, thinking about the potential development for the next twenty years and how it will keep on working as a real community. For example in these days we just got the results from geophysical surveys about large bodies of underground water that could supply the project for the next two decades.

JG: These time contrasts make the project interesting because it's meant to be something consolidated and long-term but many of the landscape and infrastructural elements we have to built will be temporary, like small observation platforms, viewpoints or wind towers. They are helping to create an architectural identity to the place supporting the growing process of this development. For us it's the first crossover between managing something that's meant to be a long-term land transformation in a rural urbanization, decades, with the implementation of iconic and temporary pieces of infrastructure.

CSH: What ambitions do you have for the future, will you continue to work on similar temporary projects?

JG: Yes, we hope to continue our relation with the AA and the British Council - or some other institutions that would eventually get interested in our work, to keep on developing the research that was opened by the Water Cathedral, slightly reformulated, bringing different outcomes such as the Rainforest, in terms of microclimates, small atmospheres and this kind of oasis condition. In Bedford Square, it is pretty alive with nature, but it's closed and people cannot really use it, we had the Rainforest outside and it was beautiful to see how some insects, birds and nature somehow migrate there and inhabited it too without any kind of previous planning. That's a strength of a temporary installation.