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Arteleku has just completed a restructuring

of the architecture and interior layout.

M I R E N   E R A S O

BGM, in a moving future

BGM is an architectural studio set up in 1998 by Santos Barea, Miguel Garay and Fernando Mora. The three are of different ages, characters and evenÑas they themselves are quick to admitÑways of thinking. In the increasingly complex architectural scene in which they work, they favour "textile" architecture, by which they mean that which is light, layered and stratified, using materials which can be manipulated and composed: architecture which can respond to current changes in a variety of areas: demographical, economic, social, political and cultural. In this dynamic context, they say, the role of the architect as an urban planner is giving way to that of problem-solver. They are interested in the change in the social function of the architect that other architects have also referred to: the Dutch group MVRDV, for example, identifies with the do it yourself idea that "we are all experts", mirroring Joseph Beuys's statement— "we are all artists".

New technology has also left its mark on the way BGM has developed and how they carry out their ideas and projects. They have been forced to question, analyse and criticise their previous presuppositionsÑin short, to accustom themselves to mobility.

Their approach to the alterations at Arteleku combined economic pragmatism, architectural functionality of architecture and the hybridisation of knowledge. BGM worked with Ibon Salaberria and Irune Sacristán on the project for remodelling the centre.

ME There has been a great change in the idea of the city: the concepts of history, territory and urbanization are being transformed by the dictates of the economy and the market. How would you interpret the deregulated urban explosion of some of the world's cities—a phenomenon which interests architects such as Rem Koolhaas? How do you see these new metropolises?

MG Just as our idea of architecture has changed, so too has our idea of the city. In the 1980s, I thought the reconstruction of the European city was possible. I also thought in terms of an architecture that was capable of reconstructing the image of the known city. In western society the value of the public element is still very prevalent. This reflects socialist thinking, which strove for that sort of concept of the city. But with the fall of the Berlin wall, we saw that that approach had come to the end of road, it was used up and offered no new developments. The process of constructing the city has changed. Today, it would be impossible to draw up an enlargement project like Cortázar's and build it over sixty years. Everything moves faster, and the building of a city has more complex and much more variable

premises. The modern city grows from many different points at the same time. The urban fabric is spreading, especially to those ambiguous areas that are neither city nor countryside. Like those Italian neo-realist films, the city today is growing in the countryside, without preconceived forms, like an oil slick spreading out to the outskirts. San Sebastian is still an overly centred city, but look at the conurbation formed by Pasajes, Rentería, Hernani, Usurbil, and so on, look at the way it's spreading over hills, in indeterminate areas, with no distinction between the natural and the artificial.

ME Indeed, the streets and squares, which for years were areas of coexistence, are being replaced by shopping areas, offering recreation, consumerism and social relationships. Things are no longer planned by the municipal authorities, but by property and commercial interests.

MG The loss of the urban form is irreversible. In the 1980s, I thought in terms of an architecture that was capable of restructuring the city, of ordering it in accordance with recognised rules, but in recent years I've had to recognise that the construction and shape of the contemporary city is open, and so architecture too has to place less importance on history; it has to have fewer preconceptions and take into account the real means of building the city and the existence of new materials on the market. Today's city and architecture are not constructed by a thinking head. The architect is a mediator between different interests and materials, an intermediary between the many economic and social variables that build the city, and when it comes to constructing a building, a mediator too between the functional needs and the infinite materials that can convincingly satisfy the established functions.

ME What was your approach to the Arteleku project?

SB One of our primary concerns was to bring the building into contact with the outside, and to relate the external and internal functions. That was what we wanted: a sense of flexible spaces, open spaces, communicating spaces, free spaces. That was the philosophy behind our work.

FM We were asked to make a change: to adapt the old building to new technologies, to new ways of making art. We worked with the idea of creating a flexible, open and intercommunicating space which would allow change and a flow of information. Although the architecture could not be very flexible because of its own limits and the construction concepts, we did achieve a visual and functional flexibility.

SB Another important question was the whole issue of maintaining and preserving the industrial character of the building.

The work didn't refer back to the memory of the building

ME Your project includes a number of solutions which I think are very clever: one, the idea of maintaining the industrial character of the building; two, the idea of moving the main facade to what had been the rear of the building (if you go round the back, you might even think you were standing in front of the main facade); and three, achieving a fluid circulation between the interior and the exterior.

MG The work didn't refer back to the memory of the building: it was an autonomous, distinguishable job. The walls don't coincide with the existing ones, they have their own spatial autonomy. That was what you might call the basic sense of the way the space was organised, and that's why we used transparent materials, or materials which allowed transparency: to achieve that opening-up movement.

SB There is a line that runs through the whole building, which brings different areas into contact. It's the longitudinal line running along the whole facade. This separating line, which isn't real, but which serves to blur the inside-outside limit somewhat, has no weight, but it's very important because it relates everything without having a material presence.

ME And what about that second facade-skin you put up in the exterior of the building?

MG There are two aspects to it: the strictly functional aspect of protecting the building from the sun, and at the same time the question of sheltering the two metal pavilions.

ME How about the concrete pavilion, designed in a rationalist style?

SB The pavilion extends to the edges of the site, and in order to allude back to the past, to the identities of the stone, iron and wood (the three traditional workshops), we used a more solid material than in the other two buildings (silk-screening and lithography) where we used metal plate. We felt it had to be the most solid element, and so we used a certain geometry and a certain material; even so, it isn't "driven" into the ground: like the two metal pavilions, it doesn't rest directly on the ground. And having it off the ground reminds people that the area near the river was once a marshland which used to get flooded.

MG Because of its position, because it's on the other side of the courtyard and because of the nature of what it contains, we worked with the idea of preserving Arteleku's memory; the elements from which the centre began are still there. That's why it's so different to the rest. It stronger in character; it has some elements that are close to stone. At the same time, it was next to a stone wall, the wall of the convent, the edge of the site so we felt it had to have a more stable material.

ME How do you relate the choice of the furniture to the building?

FM The furniture has to form part of the architecture it's going to serve, it has to reflect and at the same time participate in the architectural concept. We didn't design specific furniture for Arteleku, but we did try to select, in conjunction with the directors of the centre, furniture that would reflect the change and adapt to the idea of the project. And, speaking in rather more overall terms, the elements making up the architecture of the different spaces might themselves be considered to be furniture. The multimedia room, for example, that glass box, is actually a piece of furniture.

MG The alterations at Arteleku have a lot to do with furniture, with mobility. The plated ceilings, the glass walls, the Pepe Espaliú library, the multimedia pavilion, all those elements are designed with the objectual sense of furniture, or at least more moving than unmoving furniture. ⏮