

*Landscapes of Care. Public housing across multiple
geographies: crossing theories and practices*



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Housing the basque country. Photography of the collective space

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Abstract

In 2018, *Housing the Basque Country* (HBC) opened in Bilbao. The exhibition sought to expose the results of the housing policy achieved by the Basque Regional Government in the last three decades. HBC aimed to explain the different stories generated around public housing since this subject is, without a doubt, one of those that brings together the most realities around it: from politics to the architectural, going through the economic or productive, the sociological, historical and legal; setting at the center the inhabitant.

From the exhibition point of view, HBC started with the difficulty of highlighting for a non-professional audience a theme limited both by its geographical location and by its distance from spectacular architecture. It was decided to compile a selection of thirty projects that served to explain the evolution of public housing, taking into account criteria such as their date of completion, geographical distribution, location in cities or small towns, typological advances, and aesthetic values. But the projects were also selected for their potential to capture something that seemed essential to incorporate into the exhibition: the human dimension.

Thus, and during several trips to the thirty projects, it was possible to compile a valuable set of visual documents containing the “vital substance” that had grown in those environments. Various photographs in different formats explained aspects such as the current state of these residential complexes, their urban life, the physical traces of time, the dialogue with nature, the validity or expiration of their architecture and urban planning, and their social content. For better or for worse, the aim of that work was not to achieve an aesthetically striking photographic collection, but rather to bear witness to the literal and direct presentation of the urban – and therefore human – result in force in those inhabited environments.

In 2018, *Housing the Basque Country* (HBC) opened in Bilbao. The exhibition sought to expose the results of the housing policy achieved by the Basque Regional Government in the last three decades. HBC aimed to explain the different stories generated around public housing since this subject is, without a doubt, one of those that brings together the most realities around it: from politics to the architectural, going through the economic or productive, the sociological, historical and legal; setting at the center the inhabitant.

From the exhibition point of view, *Housing the Basque Country* started with the difficulty of highlighting for a non-professional audience a theme limited both by its geographical location and by its distance from spectacular architecture. Placing itself at the antipodes of any exhibition with attractive contents, it was decided to compile a selection of thirty projects –from among the hundreds built over thirty years– that served to explain the evolution of public housing, taking into account criteria such as their date of completion, geographical distribution, location in cities or small towns, typological advances, and aesthetic values. But the projects were also selected for their potential to capture something intangible that seemed essential to incorporate into the exhibition: the human dimension. To catch this was quite a challenge. In absence of references, the first aim was to materialize the life in and around the selected projects. Thus, it was decided to collaborate with a prestigious photographer to portray the social reality and the urban environment of the residential complexes.

The beginnings of our work were tentative. They began by visiting and getting to know the selected projects, their urban environments, and their inhabitants. The photographer and the curators applied the strategy of 'not looking', used by the Dadaists, or rather, the method of 'searching for the meaning of spaces through micro-experiences aimed at the construction of an aesthetic action to be carried out in the reality of everyday life' (Careri 2014, 59). That is to say, it was intuited that the horizon of our research could be found in the explanation of 'the city not from a geometric aesthetic point of view but from an experimental aesthetic point of view' (Careri 2014, 152).

The first approaches hardly gave results different from what it was already known. The photos portrayed the neighborhoods in their most literal version. They barely delved into the causalities agglutinated in the temporal layers of the housing complexes. Thus, the first tours of the thirty projects served to certify aged facades, inhabited dwellings, anonymous public spaces, consolidated landscapes and developing cities; epithelial appearances without depth that beyond the aesthetic contribution of suggestive photographs were not infused with the intuited contents.

The significant change came about by revisiting the San Sebastian neighborhood of Intxaurreondo. On a cold Thursday in February, bathed in the characteristic leaden light of northern Spain, an image emerged: four teenagers shared a moment in front of their mobile

phones sitting with their backs to the camera, in a perfectly defined foreground. Converging in a virtual and immediate vanishing point, the portico that appeared before them in all its depth made the moment of the encounter possible under the protection of the rain. The photograph showed, and finally demonstrated, the essential thing that was being sought in the selected architectures: that their value does not lie in their beauty, but in everything that happens and can happen in them: in their contingency (Photography Intxaurreondo I)

The photo can be understood as a perfect balance between architectural concepts and social portrait. On the one hand, it contained the substance of architecture: depth, dimension, proportion and scale, structure, open and public space, light and even time. On the other hand, the image placed four anonymous lives in the center of everything, undisputed protagonists of the scene, as the beginning of the vanishing point that connects the inhabited area with the horizon that supports it. Without a doubt, the citation of other previous views such as those of the American photographer Vivian Maier (1926–2009), or the British Nigel Henderson (1917–1985) was foundational and opened the door to an specific search: the interweaving of daily life with architecture that was revisited based on aesthetic concepts built with the two realities.

From then on, photos went from literal to real. The architecture ceased to show the urban condition and became tainted with the human. Work continued to certify the inhabitants' connection to the everyday spaces in which their lives were being built. And, why not confess it, in the disconnection that in some cases was found among urban planning, the proposed city model, its public spaces and its neighbors –these are the cases of Zabalgana, Salburúa and Lakua neighborhoods in Vitoria–(Photography Zabalgana).

Thus, and during several more trips to the thirty projects, it was possible to compile a valuable set of visual documents containing the “vital substance” that had grown in those environments. Various photographs in different formats explained aspects such as the current state of these residential complexes, their urban life, the physical traces of time, the dialogue with nature, the validity or expiration of their architecture and urban planning, and their social content.

In addition, the photographic research sought to explore how everyday living also depends on the boundaries or layers between public and private space. Some documents explained the need for thresholds, passageways and covered courtyards, porches, balconies and windows: in short, residential architecture that contains open space and air. Because, as the poet and philosopher Gaston Bachelard said, ‘what you see from the window belongs to the house as well’ (Bachelard 1965, 99). In some way, the exhibition vindicated all those types of spaces apparently unnecessary for the economy of housing but essential for life, in other words, fundamental for the colonization of the city by the human encounter and personal expansion. Photographs such as those of the Lakua, Loiu or Etxebarri complexes demonstrate the density of opportunities possible in these places, in many cases in danger of extinction.

And in the domestic interior, finally, it was possible to show a maxim that presided over the exhibition: how much the most important objective of any housing policy is not to build a house affordable for all, but to provide a home for everyone. Photographs such as those in Salvatierra's living room are psychological portraits or extensions of the inhabitant, like a third skin that is possible in the supports on which it adheres (the walls, floors and ceilings). Here the effectiveness of the furniture and the consequent order, the objects in the corners and the memories they treasure, and the possibility for the imagination to be activated by reading in silence during a quiet winter afternoon make sense. More than housing, a shelter. More than home, a universe.

For better or for worse, as if it were an exercise in contemporary neorealism, the aim of that work was not to achieve an aesthetically striking photographic collection, but rather to bear witness to the literal and direct presentation of the urban – and therefore human – result in force in those inhabited environments. The street or the square, the courtyard or the boulevard, the park or the garden, the corridor or the hallway, in short, the collective space –inhabited or uninhabited– created by this residential architecture, were part of that exhibition, and above all, its inhabitants.

Asier Santas Torres Graduated as an Architect from the University of Navarra School of Architecture (ETSAUN) in 1997. He received the Second National Prize of Completion University in 1998. Santas obtained a PhD in Architecture in 2003 with a doctoral dissertation on Urbanism and Housing. He has been lecturer of Urban Design until 2007. At present, he is Professor of Architecture and Director of the Department of Theory, Architecture and Urbanism at ETSAUN.

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Luis Asín Lapique Graduated as a photographer from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1992. Between 1998 and 2003 he was an associate professor at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Cuenca. In 2003 he received the Villa de Madrid Kaulak Photography Award. He has had several solo and group exhibitions in the USA, Spain, France and Portugal. At the present, he is one of the most internationally recognized professional architecture photographers.

The work is the result of research carried out jointly by Asier Santas and Luis Suárez, but the photos are by Luis Asín Lapique.

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Captions

Author's work

[Fig. 1]

Etxebarri (Vizcaya)

[Fig. 2]

Basauri (Vizcaya)

[Fig. 3]

Zabalgana (Vitoria-Gasteiz)

[Fig. 4]

Leioa (Vizcaya)

[Fig. 5]

Intxaurrondo I (Donostia-San Sebastián)

[Fig. 6]

Lakua (Vitoria)

[Fig. 7]

Bilbao













