

# Arquitectos Sin Fronteras—España (ASF-E)

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Arquitectos Sin Fronteras—España (ASF-E) is a nongovernmental development organization operating on a nonprofit basis. It was founded in 1992 by a group of architects and technicians who had previously collaborated with other NGOs.

ASF-E is an association of people who participate as volunteers in cooperative projects in the fields of architecture, infrastructure development, and town planning. Its main activities are “Third and Fourth World” projects, along with raising public awareness and making public criticisms related to both these “worlds.” We support the most underprivileged populations in developing countries, that is, those who suffer from a situation of extreme poverty or exclusion. We also work with the most vulnerable populations of the so-called Fourth World in our own country, without discriminating on racial, gender, sexual, religious, philosophical, or political grounds. ASF-E reports on, and informs the Spanish public about, the needs of the populations with which we work.

As a nongovernmental development organization, ASF-E collaborates on projects in which the main goal is the economic and social development of the area concerned. We focus on cooperation for development rather than emergency aid. We work, normally on technical aspects, *together* with those organizations in the Third and Fourth Worlds who request our assistance and who have knowledge of the problem to be addressed. We listen to their requests and analyze, together with them, the needs of the beneficiary population in order to provide comprehensive solutions. The aim is to promote self-dependent and self-managed local development that will improve the population’s quality of life and satisfy basic needs, always with a respectful attitude toward the environment.

ASF-E is active in developing countries in Africa, Central and South America, Asia, and Europe. It also has small offices in several Autonomous Communities in Spain. Each group runs its own projects, although there is overall coordination. Some 50 percent of ASF-E’s projects are related to education, such as schools, materials manufacturing workshops, and technical training. A further 25 percent are health projects, such as centers for primary, nutritional, and child health care. The rest are basic infrastructure and housing projects: water supply, wastewater treatment, community centers, housing construction and rehabilitation. We follow a similar process in each of our projects. Once the needs and functions of the building or infrastructure have been defined, we map out a construction plan, taking into account available building materials, local customs, and local technologies, making improvements where necessary. We also try to ensure that project financing benefits the largest possible number of people.

ASF-E’s activities are based on two different kinds of economic resources: its own income and institutional funds. It is quite hard to obtain either of them.

The organization’s own income derives from membership fees and contributions by architectural associations, firms, and individuals. These account for 10 percent of all its resources. ASF-E currently has more than a thousand members all over Spain. The aim is to increase this figure to a number large enough to guarantee the organization’s financial independence and to encourage people who are not architects to become members and to collaborate on projects.

Here we will discuss a few projects carried out in Catalonia involving the Fourth World, as we think the issues raised in these projects are most relevant to this conference.

## **The Fourth World Committee of ASF-E**

We work on Fourth World projects because we cannot remain indifferent to the growth of poverty and social exclusion in our towns: poverty alongside wealth.

The Third and Fourth Worlds are not independent realities. We need to link them and make sure we do not forget either of them. Both are the consequence of a dominant economic system that favors a minority and plunges the majority into poverty. The issue of poverty is so serious that the European Economic Community thought it necessary to define it in relation to the per capita income of each country.

In Spain, the poverty line is officially set at below a monthly income of 42,800 pesetas (around US\$238) per person, which is well below the official minimum wage. According to a report by FOESA (Foundation for the Promotion of Social Research and Applied Sociology), in 1996, 8.5 million people lived below the poverty threshold. In the province of Barcelona, 618,760 people out of a total population of 4.2 million, or 14.8 percent, were poor. The poor are becoming younger: 52 percent are under forty, while four out of ten are under twenty-five. Poverty is also becoming more urban. In cities like Barcelona it is still worse, because everything is more expensive. It is surprising and contradictory that when society experiences growth, which is normally measured by economic indices, more poverty is generated among a large part of the population. Wealth and poverty often go together, and we have almost accepted this as an inevitable or "natural" condition.

Marginalization springs from society's rejection of certain groups of people, which prevents them from integrating into it. This rejection is not a consequence of economic factors alone. There are groups who have been marginalized for other reasons, such as undocumented immigrants, the long-term unemployed, the homeless, AIDS sufferers, the mentally ill, the disabled, women, young people with casual jobs, old people. These groups are becoming larger, but the problem is very difficult to quantify for many different reasons.

The current economic and political system is the main reason why these groups exist. It is the direct cause of emigration, forcing families to leave their countries in order to escape from misery or war. When they reach wealthy countries, they usually encounter social rejection because of their different customs, and the illogical fear that they might take the few existing jobs.

Of all issues that can generate social problems, certainly one of the most pressing is housing. Many people are faced with the impossibility of renting a flat due to economic hardship or rejection by owners, neighbors, and public officials. Their situation is made worse by speculation in the housing market and rising land prices. In Barcelona, since 1999 the price of housing has risen 15 percent. Now rents are around 50 percent of average income and available rental units make up less than 30 percent of the housing stock. At the same time, there are 40,000 unoccupied flats in the city.

The substandard housing in our towns, the sink housing estates and the inner-city slums, concern us as architects and as citizens. Fourth World problems must be approached from multiple perspectives, as the different causes of marginalization are related. That is why well-coordinated, interdisciplinary collaboration between specialists in different fields is required.

The steps taken by governments are completely insufficient and fail to alleviate the problem, since they never tackle it structurally. Many volunteer civil and religious groups have been working on this issue for a long time, but have been unable to solve the problem because of its very magnitude. Fourth World issues should be dealt with comprehensively by *governments*, with all the necessary means and resources. Civil society organizations should only help and collaborate, as their means are limited. Nowadays the situation is just the reverse.

## Project 1: Demolitions

Over the past few years, many blocks of flats, squares, and people have disappeared from the old part of Barcelona. In their place are new buildings and shops or vacant spaces.

This is the result of the large-scale town planning operations defined in the PERI (Special Inner-City Refurbishment Plan), whose objective is to equip the district with open spaces, improve infrastructure, and put up new housing. All these operations have been carried out at great social cost. Older neighborhood populations, traditionally low income, have been negatively affected by the expropriations and the subsequent gentrification of the area. For instance, in the neighborhood known as La Ribera, 525 dwellings were demolished and 353 families relocated, but it seems that the expropriation negotiations were not entirely aboveboard; in some cases the owners were even threatened. Meanwhile, the price of land has increased and higher-income people have moved into the area.

In contrast to the flashy “makeover operations” carried out under PERI, much of the old housing in the area remains substandard. This demonstrates that the local government has no intention of providing support for maintaining and rehabilitating the existing houses, which are often owned by people with few economic resources. The people in this situation want a home in the same neighborhood, fair compensation for expropriation of their property, and contracts that benefit the deedholder’s spouse or children. In addition, they are asking that every legal occupant of a flat be entitled to the same benefits, not just those who have been living in the neighborhood for more than five years.

ASF-E collaborated on a project for a building located on Carrer de Sant Rafael, twenty meters from the Rambla del Raval and right beside one of the new facades in the old part of the city. The tenants of this building were concerned about its condition (cracks, damp, etc.) and fearful of the owners. When the local authority did not respond to their requests for assistance, the tenants contacted the housing program of SODEPAU (Solidaritat per al Desenvolupament i la Pai), an NGO that helps immigrants obtain housing, among other activities. Since ASF-E and SODEPAU have a collaboration agreement, they asked us to provide a technical diagnosis of the building. We organized a team of volunteers comprised of architects and students to conduct the diagnosis and prepare a report. The aim of the report was to put pressure on the local authority to repair the building. Site visits verified structural defects and substandard conditions such as the lack of showers and proper ventilation. In short, the building was unfit for habitation.

Our report, together with the partial collapse of the building, accelerated a resolution. First, all the tenants were removed from the building. Negotiations began between tenants, the owner, SODEPAU, and the local authority. It was eventually agreed that the flats would be sold to the tenants at an affordable price. The tenants then set up an owners’ association, a necessary first step in applying for a grant from the Ciutat Vella refurbishment program, a scheme run by the local authority for the old part of the city. This launched a different process, because now the affected families were the owners, which meant they were responsible for the state of the building and repairs to it.

Together with the families and SODEPAU, ASF-E drew up a renovation plan and submitted it to the Ciutat Vella. Approval by this office entitled the owners to a grant equal to 20 percent of the cost of the work. All of this took quite a long time and, meanwhile, the families had to live with relatives or rent another flat. When the project was finally approved, we asked the local authority to grant the relevant planning permissions cost-free and to help in contracting a building company.

The construction work was divided into two phases. The first, more urgent, phase involved shoring up the structure, changing the water, gas, and electrical installations, improving sanitation, refurbishing the common spaces, and replacing the bathrooms. This was done by a building company at a cost of 19 million pesetas (around US\$105,555). The second phase, renovation of the interior of the flats, was done by the families with their own resources. Since they have limited means, the families worked together, sharing skills and investigating alternative sources for materials and labor.

In this case, it was possible to put people before economic interests. The eviction of a group of tenants was prevented and, in the process of defending their rights and rebuilding their homes, the families developed methods of solidarity and self-management. They were able to remain in their homes, where they have ties to neighbors and schools, and their quality of life improved dramatically. Moreover, working together, we prevented the demolition of a building that is part of the city's history and forced a recalcitrant local authority to become involved in the process.

We believe that our experience on this project provides a model for tenants and organizations facing similar circumstances.

## **Project 2: Espacio Vihtal**

The exhibition *SIDA: Paisaje interior (AIDS: Interior Landscape)*, organized by Cristina Molina and staged, together with other ASF-E projects, at the premises of the Architects Association in Barcelona, is a far cry from the kinds of exhibitions normally seen in such venues.

The text below is by Judith Cobeña of the Citizens' Anti-AIDS Association of Catalonia, coordinator of the Espacio Vihtal program, which among other things is a daycare center, training space, transit flat, individual care service, and open space for art. The name, suggesting a vital space or a space for life, is also a pun on VIH, which, in Catalan and Spanish, is the equivalent of HIV in English.

In Barcelona, despite it being a European city at the forefront of design and culture, there still exist many difficulties ... when it comes to exercising one of the basic human rights enshrined in the European Charter, signed, among others, by the city of Barcelona: the right to decent housing.

The organizations that support people infected by HIV are daily forced to help. many of them find a place to live, but the owners of the housing available on the market are not inclined to accept as a tenant somebody with the HIV label. Even government entities, which ought to ensure that every citizen enjoys the right to housing, present obstacles when it comes to offering sufficient and adequate spaces in public buildings designed to provide shelter or when it comes to granting organizations such as ours the chance to use or rent premises to compensate for the poor public-sector response to this issue. HIV/AIDS still stigmatizes the individuals concerned and the organizations that support them. We regard the generation of a discourse in favor of free access to the latest retrovirus treatments that does not take into account the satisfaction of basic needs as akin — since we are talking about a space that can be lived in — to attempting to build a house starting with the roof. Everybody, whether or not infected with HIV/AIDS, should have their medi-

cal care, food, and housing needs satisfied, at least in the European cities that boast of their high standard of welfare ...

The photographs of *AIDS: Interior Landscape* also seek to convey the idea that the interior spaces in which people affected by HIV/AIDS live, or manage to survive, reflect the dignity of their inhabitants, in spite of the precarious situation to which they are subjected. We hope that looking at these photographs will serve to make us all more decent.

The collaboration between ASF-E and the Citizens' Anti-AIDS Association of Catalonia (Associació Ciutadana Anti-SIDA de Catalunya — ACASC) began as a result of the need for improvements in the building where the organization's offices are located. The building was in an extremely precarious state and the organization operated with no official support.

ACASC requested our support and collaboration and this opened a relationship and participation process different from the typical one. ASF-E undertook the technical analysis of the building's condition through a volunteer team that involved both ACASC staff and its client population. Once the project was drawn up, together we began the process of obtaining funds from private and public entities. We negotiated with the local authorities, and struck deals with construction companies to reuse materials left over from other jobs. We hired workers through NGOs that assist immigrants. The construction process was monitored on a weekly basis by all the parties concerned. Finally, we publicized the organization's work by arranging for *AIDS: Interior Landscape* to be shown at the Architects Association in conjunction with a series of roundtable discussions.

As a result of this alternative way of working, more groups and individuals were involved in the project: the beneficiary population, architects, students, members of other participating NGOs. It was possible to obtain funds from private foundations and material donations from building companies. The AIDS issue was publicized in an unusual venue. The construction work was done by other vulnerable people, helping to train them for the job market. And the original architecture of the building, hidden under many layers, has been recovered, providing a quality space for people who are fighting for their lives.

### **Project 3: Youth**

The number of poor youth in Catalonia has been growing. They suffer from casual employment, relying on temporary employment agencies for jobs, and must continue living with their parents because of the lack of cheap flats for rent and the vicious circle of consumption.

In 1996, a group of squatters occupying a former cinema in Barcelona asked us for a study of the building's condition. Shortly afterward, the squatters were evicted. They had turned the building into a social center and this was favorably regarded by the local residents, who demonstrated against the heavy-handed eviction initiated by the local authorities. The excessive police repression and residents' support for the alternative recovered space swayed public opinion in favor of the squatter movement, which denounced speculation by owners, estate agents, and construction companies through direct action, occupying abandoned buildings in the city. They demanded that the right to a home take priority over property rights. They created their own information media through which they publicized and criticized police repression of the movement. And they created self-managed alternative spaces in which they organized community activities.

ASF-E could not remain indifferent to such a process, so we arranged a public forum at the Architects Association where squatters could explain the situation. Following this, on May 29, 2000, in the same venue, we organized a debate entitled "Are Youth Citizens with Full Rights? Housing, Space, and Emancipation." The invited speakers included:

- The chairpersons of the civil rights, housing, and youth committees of the Barcelona City Council
- The general director of the architecture and housing department of the Catalan government
- A representative of the Federation of Neighborhood Associations of Barcelona
- A squatter (who chose to speak from the floor rather than the platform)
- A member of the Barcelona Youth Council
- The chairperson of Arquitectos Sin Fronteras
- A member of MAPAFS (a group of parents alarmed at the police repression of an antifascist demonstration in the city)
- A lawyer
- A member of the Federation of Immigrant Associations in Catalonia
- A member of Avalot, the youth wing of the UGT trade union in Catalonia

Transcripts of the proceedings were sent to all the speakers as well as the Local Government Federation of Catalonia, and posted on ASF-E's website. The discussants proposed a variety of actions and made a number of policy recommendations, among them, to pressure the different levels of government to:

- Decriminalize squatting.
- Establish equitable land policies that are responsive to community needs.
- Develop new policies for reclaiming abandoned buildings, whether public or private.
- Encourage imaginative solutions and alternatives to the housing problem.
- Grant immigrants full citizenship rights.
- Provide young people with opportunities to set up new projects without erecting barriers beforehand.
- Tax those who profit from town planning (builders, transport companies, etc.) to fund affordable housing for young people.
- End discrimination against immigrants in access to rental housing.
- Promote spaces in the city that reflect and reinforce the mixing of different cultures.
- Respect and remove restrictions on alternative models of management characteristic of young people, such as Centres Socials Okupats (Squatted Social Centers).
- Encourage and respect young people's autonomy, and end the criminalization of youth.

The speakers identified a number of other significant issues. First, *the city should be a cultural and educational space for the young* but, unfortunately, politicians view it as an electoral market. It is therefore necessary to actively search for sites and resources and to be open to self-administration and new possibilities. Second, all citizens have *the right to be informed* about what is happening in their neighborhoods, which implies an overall approach to government that is neither restrictive nor bureaucratic. Third, different levels of government have the option and the opportunity to provide resources for *creating a city that is beneficial and hospitable to its young and elderly*. The gulf between the city and its young and old citizens, evident in the paltry resources directed toward these groups, is a danger that could throw the democratic system into crisis. Finally, noting the inflexibility of various levels of local government, speakers insisted that *the city must learn to be receptive to new models of participation arising from changes in society*.

As a consequence of these discussions, a civic platform was established to investigate the conclusions and recommendations, which will also be published in a forthcoming volume.

Meanwhile, the emblematic building that had sparked the mobilization — the old cinema in Barcelona — was demolished by the city in 1999. As of March 2001, a new building is being constructed in its place with no visible sign of who is behind the project and what the structure will be used for.

## **Project 4: Migrating Objects**

According to data from a survey conducted by CIS (Social Research Center), immigration occupies third place in the list of problems of most concern to Spanish people, after unemployment and terrorism.

Compared to other European nations, the proportion of immigrants in Spain (2.5 percent of the population) is low, but immigration has been increasing considerably in a process that now seems irreversible. The recently enacted Foreigners Act, more restrictive than its predecessors in some respects such as basic rights, came in for heavy criticism from NGOs, trade unions, and political parties, and inspired civil disobedience.

On January 20, 2001, several hundred people, mainly from Southeast Asia and Africa, began a sit-in at a church in the center of Barcelona. It lasted fortyseven days, the last fifteen of which the participants were on hunger strike. Their demand was “Papers for Everyone.” This action was joined by numerous other immigrant groups who organized sit-ins in nine other churches around the city. These struggles had a major impact on life in the city and garnered widespread support, culminating in a demonstration of 50,000 people.

Meanwhile, we should point out that certain segments of the population, either through ignorance or influenced by the opinions and statements of government officials and sensationalist media headlines such as “huge waves of immigrants” or “an avalanche of foreigners,” consider immigration a disaster for the city and the country. Such groups couch their racism in appeals to preserve “our” culture and “our” identity against intrusions by foreign elements.

It is within this context that ASF-E proposed the project *Migrating Objects*, in collaboration with the artist Eulàlia Valldosera. Her works have focused on new definitions of the subject and its inescapable separateness from its environment, starting from body issues and their projection upon the immediate surroundings: the home, what she calls “the house of the self.” More recently, she began a series entitled “interviewing objects,” which consists of interviews with people about the objects in their private spaces, which she redefines as the turning point of our identities.

Immigration poses challenges to conventional understandings of the relationship between citizens, and underscores the urgent need to foster and encourage cooperative relations between different groups of people within communities. *Migrating Objects* is an educational initiative designed to assist the interventions of individuals and associations concerned with social integration. The project consists of a video and other visual materials about immigration and the home, with the aim of spreading knowledge about the diverse ways in which immigrants settle into and interpret a new place, in a language combining poetry and anthropology. We intend to contact immigrant associations in Barcelona and interview a selection of people about the objects in their homes which create an

emotional map of the territory they have occupied. The coincidences and divergences in the statements about the objects reveal much about the lives of their owners, their social status, psychological experience, and biography. Working with Valldosera, we created a typology of objects consisting of:

- Objects that hold memories of the place left behind.
- Objects that the immigrant has found in his/her new city and that have been given a new interpretation and function.
- Objects that substitute for others that the immigrant cannot afford for economic or other reasons.
- Objects whose value or function we do not know because they belong to a domestic ritual which is unknown to us.
- Objects common to every culture onto which are projected identity, social status, the division between private and public spaces, gender, family relationships, and so on.
- Objects that demonstrate the immigrant's need to appropriate his or her new space.

*Migrating Objects* is a reflection on humans' territorial instincts. It is also an indirect investigation into housing conditions in Barcelona revealed through the micro-stories of objects that reside within the homes of immigrants. It attempts to understand and communicate to others the customs of newly settled communities. With this project, we have tried to create a space in which people can reflect on the transformation leading to a multicultural society.

## Conclusions

The interventions by Arquitectos Sin Fronteras in the city of Barcelona and its metropolitan area are painstaking and fraught with difficulties. They reveal the pockets of poverty and exclusion, and the extreme governmental neglect of a population that is increasing locally and internationally as a consequence of the advance of capitalism.

While economic and political elites construct the "Barcelona of the Future" with the symbolic buildings of multinational corporations, emerging throughout the city are groups weaving a network of resistance in the face of this society of capital by creating alternative spaces and voices.

ASF-E's small contributions are part of this network of resistance.

*Marta Calsina and Elsa López. Arquitectos Sin Fronteras - España (ASF-E). In: Okwui Enwezor, Carlos Basualdo, Ute Meta Bauer, Susanne Ghez, Sarat Maharaj, Mark Nash, Octavio Zaya (ed.): Democracy Unrealized. Documenta11\_Platform1. Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern-Ruit. 2002, pp. 231-244.*