



Arch 384: Competitions Elective
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Make Space For Art

La Reunion TX is a not for profit organization based out of Dallas that is dedicated to strengthening and sustaining the arts community in Dallas. Their goal is to establish an artists residency in Dallas where artists will be able to apply for residency grants that can last anywhere from a week to a year. The competition dealt with the design of four living spaces and artist studios as well as an exhibition/gallery space. In their outline, the group asked that the building be an example for the community of sustainability and progress.

“I am for an art that takes into account the direct effect of the elements as they exist from day to day apart from representation... A park carries the values of the final, the absolute, and sacred. Dialectics have nothing to do with such things. I am talking about a dialectic of nature that interacts with the physical contradictions inherent in natural forces as they are - nature as both sunny and stormy. Parks are idealizations of nature, but nature in fact is not a condition of the ideal. Nature does not proceed in a straight line, it is rather a sprawling development. Nature is never finished.” (Smithson, “Cultural Confinement”)

Located in the north-eastern suburbs of Dallas, Texas, the site for La Reunion TX’s future artists residency embodies the “sprawling” characteristics of nature that Smithson touches on. The site itself is a wooded irregular six acres on the side of an escarpment. The only built elements contained on the site are an old railway trestle and an old house, both of which have been abandoned and have been overgrown by nature. Neglected over the years, these man-made elements on the site have fallen into disrepair and away from the “idealized” perfection of the park further into the realm of natural, so that even though they are man-made they now are overcome by nature and are as much a part of the environment as the trees and foreign grass species that have also run rampant over the site. Confronted by these raw natural conditions of the site, a decision was made to propose a work that responded to the contours and spirit of the setting. The goal was to design a building that would be able to amalgamate and evolve

along with the landscape.

Of course, there are a vast number of projects that have taken their cues from the natural settings they are located in, but because of the contour change on this particular site, precedents that received the most attention were of the hillside variety. Three projects, in particular, would come to inform the approach of the design in a major way. These were; the Villa Malaparte in Capri, Alvaro Leite Siza Vieira's Casa Tolo in Portugal and Richard Serra's landscape art "Shift", located in King City, Ontario. A variety of other projects influenced decisions throughout the process, but from a starting off point, these three were critical.

Because of the natural sloped setting of the site, Villa Malaparte was an instinctive choice of precedent. The house is set in what looks like an uninhabitable rocky crag off a point of the island of Capri in Italy. One of the more intriguing aspects of that project is its sense of passage. The Villa sits atop a precarious rock, and upon approach is viewed in this magnificent position from above. It almost seems like it is in an impossible position, and yet it faces the viewer with a giant staircase climbing up to its roof, showing a human response to the navigation of the dangerous precipice. It is an abstraction of the uphill climb to get there and the negotiation of the contours and the passage to the site. This project fostered a couple of ideas present in the proposal for La Reunion TX. One was this idea of negotiating the contours of the escarpment to make it possible for a person to easily navigate through the level changes of the site and the other was the idea of using the rooftop slab as a lookout point ; a way to view the

landscape while at the same time being a piece of it.



Villa Malaparte and its precarious position.

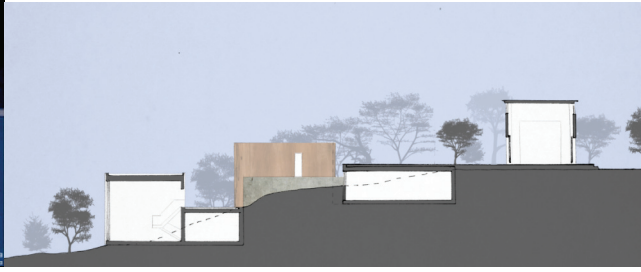


La Reunion with similar rooftop lookouts.

Casa Tolo, a house in Portugal by Alvaro Leite Siza Vieira, is a more recent example of a modern house integrating itself into the landscape and responding to its natural setting. In the case of Casa Tolo, the building doesn't just negotiate the contours of the site like Villa Malaparte does, but it in fact becomes a part of the site and measures the contours and drop in elevation on the site along itself. Again, there are the stairs, in Casa Tolo's case, both internal and external that act as a passage down the hilly site. Again, there is the occupation of the roof element, and having that become a landscape feature. This project, as a precedent, informed the relationship with the terrain, the form and simple materiality of concrete. The Dallas site, with its steep escarpment, benefited from dealing with the siting the same way Casa Tolo does. In the Dallas project, like Casa Tolo, the living units are used as stepping stones embedded into the hillside like stairs. The concrete is used to act as a retaining wall, and the end that sticks out the hillside is completely glazed. The living units are then designed so that the living and dining section of the unit are by the glazed front while the bathroom and kitchen are put back towards the back of the unit where natural sunlight isn't as necessary. The proto-type for this living unit is taken from basic small studio-unit space planning from a typical condo.



View up Casa Tolo.



Section through La Reunion.

The occupation of the rooftops is taken from both Villa Malaparte and Casa Tolo, although in the case of this project, the roofs are imagined as green roofs that would be planted with four different species of grasses and plants (One species for each of the green roofs over the four living units) that are indigenous to the area. The hope being that these planted indigenous species would spread and “sprawl” over time and begin to re-naturalize an area that has been overcome by foreign species of plants.

Richard Serra’s “Shift” in King City was also an inspiration for this project. In that piece of large-scale landscape art, Richard Serra navigated a valley contour change. The six concrete walls in that piece are all equal lengths and heights and spread off at different angles, which are determined by the contour drop. All six walls start at the ground level and then go off on an angle which, when measured at the other end, equal five feet in height. The living units from the Dallas project use the same formula, with each starting at ground level and ending so that the other face is completely exposed and able to accommodate floor to ceiling windows. And again this plan formation ends up relating to Smithson’s viewpoint on nature: “Nature does not proceed in a straight line, it is rather a sprawling development.” In the same way, this proposal is more a reflection of the raw nature it is surrounded by and it truly becomes a register of the contour changes of the escarpment.



image and plan diagram of Serra's "Shift".



Site plan of La Reunion with "sprawling" character of buildings.

From a typology standpoint, this project is a kind of hybrid. Each unit is imagined as a combination of two modules, a living unit and a studio unit. The combination live/work unit is part housing, and part artist studio. The idea of a live/work unit is not any sort of a new idea and the idea of one placed in nature also has its precedents. The Schindler House in Southern California is a classic modern example of a housing-type modified to contain a working studio. The Schindler House was built so that the studio and living spaces include large windows that open out onto the beautiful southern

California terrain. The landscape can then act as an inspiration to the artists working in the studio. The Dallas project also uses the natural landscape as an inspiration piece. Both the studio and living unit module are solid on all three sides with the north wall composed of floor to ceiling windows that face down the hill and look out onto the site. This also has the added benefit of only allowing north indirect light into the space.



Schindler House in Los Angeles



Typical plans of live/work modules for La Reunion

The studio module in the Dallas project contains a connector unit. The studio is a cube shape rather than a rectangle so that it is a double-height workspace. The space needs to be flexible to account for the fact that any variety of artists working in any type of medium may end up using the space. The double-height space is also important so that it can connect the entrance plane (the roof plane) down to the living/work plane of the unit. Since direct lighting can be distracting and damaging to certain art pieces the studio module does not have any windows on the east, west or south facades keeping out any direct light. The north face is entirely glazed but since it isn't a perfect north it also has a wood screen placed on the exterior to block a certain amount of direct sun.

Another aspect of the studio unit is the pre-fabricated wood panel cladding. The exterior is imagined as pre-fabricated recycled wood panels that can be custom cut to contain any variety of designs. The firm drMM used a pre-fab wood panel system for their project “Naked house”. Computer drawings are used and large saws cut through the large wood panels much like a laser printer would work cutting through much smaller pieces. These panels are then easily installed on site. The idea of the pre-fab custom wood panels is that they would act as a screen to block a deal of direct sunlight. A competition could be held so that artists and designers could design the patterns that would be cut into the pre-fab panels. This would help with both self-promotion of the La Reunion Artists group, but also would help foster a community of artists, both locally and potentially even internationally.



DrMM's Naked House.



Similar Pre-fab recycled wood panels on La Reunion

With regards to sustainability, there are some concerns about tearing up an undeveloped natural setting and placing such a large footprint down the face of the escarpment, however there are benefits to this plan that may offset those concerns. The large footprint is comprised almost entirely of green roof systems that aim to carry indigenous plant species and one day become fully integrated into an ecosystem that has been over-run by foreign grasses. Also, the thick walls and placement of the buildings in the hillside would lead to good insulation numbers and low energy heating and cooling. While water run-off would need to be studied further, there is a pond at the bottom of the site that could potentially take storm drainage and return it to the environment.

While there were a series of precedents that helped inform the design of this artist residency that were not even covered, these few that have been discussed were integral in helping to inform a variety of design issues throughout the course of the project.

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