

## CARME PINÓS: OVERLAY | Ana Maria Torres

**"THERE IS ALWAYS A NARRATIVE.** We always invent something. I invent stories for myself to design. It is a dialogue with the program, with the landscape," says the Catalan architect Carme Pinós.<sup>1</sup> These dialogues—journeys linking human activities with traces of natural and cultural histories, the imprint of time on the landscape—become her design process.

Sinuous lines, curved walls, teetering planes, inviting arches, sturdy containers, and rediscovered topographies lead to Pinós's architecture; like a site-specific sculpture, her work melds visual and intangible forces into an architectonic space. The forms, derived from gesture and serving structural integrity, are overlaid to ensure tension between building and setting. Interior spaces invariably open up to vistas. Materials—concrete, wood, and stone—over time develop a patina that allows the architecture to express its age and history as well as its birth and human use.

Carme Pinós's design for the JVC Cultural & Business Center fair area in Guadalajara, Mexico (1999–2001), exemplifies her design strategies. From the bridge buildings that provide entrance to the fair to the concrete ribbons that shelter the different stands and restaurants to the parking lot structure, the architect emphasizes a poetic of emptiness as well as a connection with nature. The fair, conceived as a park, is given form by the overlay of different types of lines. Some become planting beds, some create paths, and some are concrete ribbons that serve as roofs for various stands and restaurants. The space is generated by a particular relationship between place and landscape. Pinós's unlikely connections to the surroundings reestablish a reverence for nature. Her vocabulary of lines, walls, planes, arches, containers, and topographies is here fully manifested. The bridge buildings are molded up from the earth and at the same time levitate lightly from a superstructure. These buildings function not only as connectors between the cultural and the business city but also as a flexible space for exhibitions. The exhibition areas are hung within the arched supports of the bridges, creating a free-floating floor with a character not determined by columnar structure.

Place and space are some of history's most important philosophical concepts. Aristotle recognized that "where" is one of the ten indispensable categories of every substance. Heidegger redefined the ideas: "Space is now becoming absorbed into place";<sup>2</sup> he understood that lines found on a surface are the elements that define space. Lines that in the creation of space invigorate the surface are both real and projections of shadows. It is from these that Pinós conceives her vocabulary of forms.

1. Ana Maria Torres, "Carme Pinós," *NYSto* 1996, no. 4: 35–37.  
2. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 138.

The shapes of the ribbons at the project in Mexico are specific catenary curves that allow the concrete to be self-supporting. Under these concrete ribbons, where food stands provide a domestic scale, the vast scale of the project becomes more intimate. This contributes to a dialogue between large scale and pared-down precision, to a reconciliation of the rational and the intuitive. These ribbons, like the bridge buildings, express Pinós's attitude toward structure and material choice. Her viewpoint leads to the creation of hovering volumes, floating slabs, reinforced-concrete ribbons, and large spans supported by various girders and lattices. The minimal aesthetic of the lines of these structures implies a mastery of space. As in modernist art, the architect draws from her own well of forms instead of from historical ornament.

Pinós begins her designs in a personal way: she occupies a piece of land in an almost ritualized process of walking in lines, arches, or zigzags. This action is directly related to the earth and land art developed by artists like Robert Smithson and Richard Long. The correspondence with the topography of the earth evolved from concepts such as Smithson's understanding of "site and nonsite." As Lucy Lippard states, "The site-nonsite notion deeply affected the development of site-sculpture (art made for specific outdoor locations) by making this leap between object and source, work of art and site and all surrounding views."<sup>3</sup> In all her projects, Pinós mounds, erodes, and moves the earth to accommodate, for example, parking lot structures, park grounds, or sports facilities. In the tradition of the earthwork, her approach to nature brings to mind Smithson's relationship to place where, as he said, "remote pasts meet remote futures."<sup>4</sup>

Even in Carme Pinós's early works, such as those in partnership with the architect Enric Miralles—the Plaza Mayor at Parets del Valles (1985), the conversion of a factory in Badalona into the La Llauna

School (1984–86), or the cemetery at Igualada (1985–91)—the design works as place, creating an ambiguous relationship between figure and ground. The works are often defined by bold geometric incisions, diagonal accents, zigzagging routes, and boomerang-shaped mounds. The cut of the earth, the sloping concrete embankments, and the orchestration of light and shadow are examples of the architect's exploration of the boundaries of the structures and the needs of the users. In exploiting the possibilities of place and program, she sculpts an architecture that creates a continuous flow of space. In these dialogues between the outdoors and the interior spaces, users are suspended in the landscape. The space defined is the result of a living experience.

These preoccupations have continued in her own projects: the pedestrian bridge of Petrer (1991–99), Stations Park in Palma de Mallorca (1998–2002), and La Serra High School in Mollerussa (1998–2001). The fluidity of space, continuities between building and nature, and raggedly informal compositions suggest the architecture of Alvar Aalto and his approach to form through the concept of "super-rationality," which incorporates sociological, intuitive, and subconscious fractures within the design equation.<sup>5</sup>

The spatial conception that emerges from her ritual of interacting with place is evident at the pedestrian bridge in Petrer. The articulation of three arches and a platform that folds into itself, sheltering the pedestrian, creates a public space, a plaza that brings identity to an ill-defined suburb. The geometry of the design gives the visitor a clear sense of orientation as he or she steps onto the platform. Form and material, light and shadow are calibrated to enhance the experience of moving over the plaza. As is typical of her projects, Pinós develops ideas gradually and frequently returns to earlier themes, such as an emphasis on public routes or the organizing sequences of connected spaces.

3 Lucy R. Lippard, *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 30.  
4 *The Writings of Robert Smithson: Essays with Illustrations*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 179–85.  
5 Richard Weston, *Alvar Aalto* (London: Phaidon, 1995).

Arches have become an intrinsic part of the architect's vocabulary. The arch is not only the aesthetic focal point but also the main structural support and basis for the formal composition at the stadium and sports center at Punta Umbría, Huelva (1994); this composition emerges from the balance of arches, stadium, and roofs of the stands. Grounding the building, the arches also allow the roofs of the stadium and the stands to be suspended in air. The exterior structural complexity is in contraposition to the simplicity of the interior. Support facilities are distributed freely beneath the seating, forming a world of serpentine geometry and soft incisions. The design interweaves ideas and sensibilities both generated from Pinós's personal experience of the site and based on the already existing everyday culture. Her intervention enhances human interaction and promotes the enjoyment of light, space, and urban life. In the interior landscape, columns, stairs, and walls replace the trees and hills of the natural environment. At the Betty Boop soccer stadium in Seville (1997), the two arches from the stadium at Punta Umbría join to create a single arch that holds up the roof for the grandstand area. It is a "play of contrasts"<sup>6</sup>—a public building and a stadium. Stairways help to divide the building into these two areas. The use of minimal structural elements and the concentration of circumscribed spaces, which house the program, result in the building's sparkling lightness. Betty Boop seems to float between the two arches.

At both of these stadiums, the character of the architecture brings identity to the site. The buildings imply social participation; an underlying theatrical quality is emphasized by the lack of a main facade. These projects reflect an unorthodox combination of intellectual approaches and design strategies. Instead of aiming for conceptual and formal purity, Carme Pinós seeks to reconcile such opposites as nature and culture, history and modernity, standardization and variety, intellect and emotion, reason and intuition.

The architecture, an overlay of form, matter, and intuition, is also, simultaneously, a place. "The concept of place exists in all my projects. It is the concept of inherited culture, the land you walk on, where you find the memories of your ancestors," notes Pinós.<sup>7</sup> She also describes many of her projects as based on intuition—like Dunar Park at Matalascañas (1996), a recreational facility near the sea. Lines, leaps, and traces define the arched form, geometry, and material of the Dunar Park beach structures. The lightness of these structures, the timber over sand, and the artificial dunes reconcile architect and visitor with the untouched landscape. Providing the unique places and corners that may be discovered in any landscape, Pinós has made the stroll to the beach her project. This attitude reflects her most important view: human activity is a fundamental part of nature. Her choice of simple natural materials and her ability to express their "biological phenomenon" are both connected with a particularly Japanese notion of appreciating nature as continuous contemplation of beauty. Pinós's projects, especially Dunar Park, follow this Japanese tradition: architectural structures and scenery are equal elements in the creative process.

Likewise, it is evident in her site plans that the concept of "territory" exists in all her projects. Pinós avoids introducing foreign elements, instead translating existing lines on the ground into paths of stepping stones, mounds, arches, serpentine walls, and wooden planks to pace a journey on foot. The choice of materials is important in articulating some of the underlying ideas. Random patterns of wood sleepers, for instance, give the impression of animal tracks.

Pinós confronts the place by "looking the ground in the eye," an attitude articulated by the artist Richard Long. She explains her projects as a dialogue with nature, a play with the environment, never as mimesis or imposition. The principal idea is to touch, to

6 Carme Pinós: *Algunos Proyectos (Desde 1991)*/Carme Pinós: *Projects since 1991* (Barcelona: Actar, 1997), 113.

7 Carme Pinós, conversation with author, 2001.

8 Richard Long, *Five, Six, Pick Up Sticks, Seven, Eight, Lay Them Straight* (exhibition catalog, London: Anthony d'Offay Gallery, 1980).

move aside the earth, after observing and understanding. The notion of a journey is always implicit. Spaces, paths, and planes emerge from traces of movement left on the land, traces left after a walk. Long expressed these concepts in 1980: "A walk traces the surface of the land, it follows an idea, it follows the day and the night. A road is the site of many journeys. The place of a walk is there before the walk and after it."<sup>8</sup> Pinós's designs lie somewhere between the cycles of the earth and the lines of a journey. As a result the views of her buildings are always askance, elusive, fleeting. The structures are meant to be discovered, like some timeless construction.

The treatment of topography is an intrinsic part of such projects as the recreational area in Morella (1996). Here the design itself is a geographic accident; the architect describes the building as having its space between the folds of a single material—within the folds of a strip of cloth dropped to the ground. Her comments are strikingly similar to a description of Marcel Duchamp's creation of the forms for "3 Standard Stoppages" (1913–14): he dropped a string to the ground and then cut a shape following its curves.<sup>9</sup> He identified this piece as the first use of chance as a medium. Similarly, in one gesture Pinós takes a plane and folds it around the existing topography; this is a development of previous designs like the archery range project (1989–92). Thus different play platforms, rather than discrete buildings, articulate the topography of the recreational area in Morella. The design is a journey between outdoor and indoor, ground and roof; it is the result of a game, a personal process. She says, "I play with the anecdote, with surprise. I play because everything is a game. There is an adventurous spirit . . . You have the general concept of the project, but you need to have the capacity to convert the process to a life experience."<sup>10</sup>

Pinós takes a similar approach to larger-scale projects, like the bullring and leisure center at Móstoles (1996), using one gesture to define the structure of the project. In this case, it is a circle. By emphasizing the circle of the bullring and eroding the earth to house the services, she defines a modern interpretation of ceremonial prehistoric spaces such as Stonehenge. As the artist Chris Jennings says about the many prehistoric sites that reveal an unexpected level of astronomical, mathematical, and engineering expertise, "They seem to act as a focal point in the landscape, bringing together the sky, the horizon and the land." He notes that they attract "not only because they are beautiful forms but because they direct and extend our vision beyond themselves. They emphasize man's proper relationship to the landscape."<sup>11</sup> The conception of the bullring/leisure center as a carved-out sequence of spaces that congregate around a circle is rooted in a particular attitude toward the surroundings, focusing the attention of the visitor on where he or she is, instead of on where he or she has come from. Overhanging concrete roofs, parapets, sloping concrete embankments, and a transparent trellis define the boundary between a place of multiple functions and the ground floor—a place for the ritual of the bullfight. As the visitor descends to the lower level, the space expands and contracts, offering a rich experience of movement.

At the Waterfront Juan Aparicio in Torre Vieja (1996–99), the architect molds the ground and creates itineraries using materials and sculpting the topography to house different recreational programs. Concrete and wood planes define the pavement; the surface becomes the topography. Changing textures and levels define areas that house various parts of the program and establish a connection between the edge of the city, the pedestrians, and the sea. At the same time, the public space allows for contemplation.



In Stations Park in Palma de Mallorca (1998–2002), Pinós used lines that resonate with roads and journeys to create space. Not only are the lines not simple horizontal elements incorporated into a space, the architecture itself is taken back to the earth via a rejection of the traditional posture of heroic verticality. This recalls ceremonial sites that were created in the first millennium A.D. by the Nazca culture. In 1975, Robert Morris explained that the lines were made by a culture obsessed with "space as a palpable emptiness . . . The lines were constructed by a process of removal. They do not impress by indicating superhuman efforts or staggering feats of engineering. Rather it is the makers' care and economy and insight into nature of a particular landscape that impresses."<sup>12</sup> In the same manner, Pinós's buildings impress as a result of her careful consideration of and insight into the surroundings. Sequences of arched roof trellises covering walkways suggest the grottoes in Gaudí's Güell Park and Le Corbusier's exploration of free-standing curves in the 1930s and, later, in his chapel at Ronchamp. In the recreational facilities for Caldas de Reis (2000–2002) or the outdoor swimming pool in Mont-Sartoux (1995), the lines are transformed into planes and wavelike surfaces. Whether line or plane, the space created undoubtedly belongs to Pinós; it complements both "the rigorous plane of analysis and the turbulent wavelike surge of fantasy," as Colin St. John Wilson has written of Alvar Aalto.<sup>13</sup>

Pinós also folds vertical concrete planes to define the spaces of projects such as the extension of Hotel Formentor in Palma de Mallorca (1999–2000), two single-family houses in Rosas (1998), and the cultural center in Benidorm (1997). The planes adopt the tracings of earlier projects, just as they adapt the tracings of their surroundings. She achieves an uncompromising equilibrium between interior and exterior as well as strict control over volume, plane, line, and section. The planes never close; they are open to vistas that let the space flow. Pinós explains,

"Every time you cross a corridor, the landscape appears. It is how you know you are crossing a corridor. You would never find yourself inside of an abstract geometric form in my architecture. Your experience of the space is more important than the geometry of the space."<sup>14</sup> The process of construction, like the process of design, is the result of an assembly; it does not hide what it covers but uncovers the particularities of the place. The architect notes, "The most important thing is the process of the construction. You injure the earth. It is the relationship between you and the natural elements."<sup>15</sup>

The shift from curved to intertwined planes is an inherent part of Pinós's architecture in projects like the Son Hugo swimming pools in Palma de Mallorca (1996), the Soren residence in La Massana (2001–3), and La Serra High School in Mollerussa (1998–2001). The designs repeat the movement of the surroundings and respond to the particulars of context and bareness of budget. In the Soren residence, the tilted roof and stratified vertical planes relate to the steep terrain; in fact, roofs work as the facade of the building. The Mollerussa school, like the boarding school in Morella (1986–94), opens to nature and the daily life of its surroundings. The building design is articulated by a central void created by the access ramps and staircase and by a stratified roof; it thereby emphasizes the importance of the pedestrian scale. As in modern sculpture, Pinós creates great complexity by juxtaposing concrete planes that define a void. According to Kosme de Barañano, "The void is dimensioned by non-created spaces."<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in a sculptural series by the Basque sculptor Jorge Oteiza, *Cajas Vacías* (*Empty Boxes*) (1956–57), non-enclosed cubes are defined by a folding metal plane; their apertures provoke a continuous and renewed spatial aperture—as he states, "a void breathed by the forms."<sup>17</sup> The importance of circulation throughout the high school is emphasized by treating the building as a street and determining its relationship with the

12 Robert Morris, "Aligned with Nazca," *Artforum*, October 1975, 39.

13 Colin St. John Wilson, "Alvar Aalto and the State of Modernism," *Architectural Reflections: Studies in the Philosophy and Practice of Architecture* (Oxford: Butterworth Architecture, 1992), 91.

14 Torres, "Carme Pinós," 35–37.

15 Torres, "Carme Pinós," 35–37.

landscape and natural light. Pinós conceived of the building as a shimmering structure of transformations, responding to the changing light and weather and color of each hour of the day and season. She considered the effect of afternoon sunlight on the central space, which transforms a concrete wall into a field of warmth. This emphasis revives the concept of "character" in her buildings.

In Pinós's most recent projects, the Puerta de Hierro building (2002–4), the community housing in Nazaret (2000–2003), and the business center in Hameln-Pyrmont (2001), her planes have become containers. The complexity of the spaces is created by the juxtaposition of volumes and their interrelation with space. The vertical composition of the volumes of the Puerta de Hierro building allows the interior spaces to have a direct relationship with the surrounding environment. The correspondences between the floating containers in Hameln-Pyrmont explore spatial layering on a large scale and eliminate any suggestion of centrality. The containers overlap to create a sequence of spaces characterized by the interplay of dark and bright, the use of mass and void. At Nazaret, light and shade are essential devices in the architectonic experience. The zigzagging layout and the rhythm of the buildings' varying heights imply and invite physical movement. The housing scheme, although adhering to an essentially rationalist approach, uses spatial ideas to individualize the units, locating living areas in the corners. A sense of the outdoors is re-created within the dwelling.

Every project or space designed by Carme Pinós provides a characteristic intimacy or monumentality: it rejects or invites. Her architecture, through series of visual images and through experiences encountered, recalls the Renaissance understanding of the five senses in relation to the cosmic body. The perception of architecture is a multisensory experience; qualities

of matter, space, and scale are measured equally by eye, ear, nose, and skin. Her architecture never loses its sensuality; in fact, it invites the viewer to be sensuously curious. As she states, "I want my architecture to be understood not only with the eyes and the head, but also with the whole body."<sup>18</sup> The spirit of the exterior and the space around it, as well as the choice and finish of materials, emulates the silence of the landscape. She walks the landscape with naked feet, in contact with the stones and the earth, learning the topography to create topography.

The spaces are approached, confronted, related to the human body, moved through, utilized. Pinós, like Alvar Aalto or Robert Smithson, recognizes that the essence of architectural experience consists of the act of entering a room, of looking into or out of a window, of measuring the world with the body. All is grounded in the comprehensibility by the senses of the act of construction. In her practice, she pursues architecture's timeless task—creating embodied metaphors to recognize and remember the self. Pinós combines in one gesture, in one immaterial evocation of physical experiences, her understanding of architecture. Visitors who enter these spaces immediately identify with them: the place and the moment become a direct interaction with the senses that detaches perception from the present and allows instead the experience of the slow, firm flow of time and tradition.

Her projects are overlays of nature and culture and meaning and function. They exist in a temporal dialogue between two kinds of time, the time that leaves an imprint on the memory and natural time. The time and movement she discovers and creates through and around the projects are manifest in her choice of materials and vocabulary of forms. Pinós's architecture is conceived through a process of seduction: "She would not make use of any idea or any impression, any fantasy, until it was part of her visceral experience."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Kósme de Barañano, *Chilida-Haidigger-Huaseri: El Concepto de Espacio en la Escultura y la Plástica del Siglo XX* (Gastarook: Universidad del País Vasco, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> Jorge Oteiza, *Proposito Experimental* (exhibition catalog, Madrid: Fundación Caja Pensiones, 1988), 58.

<sup>18</sup> Torres, "Carme Pinós," 35–37.  
<sup>19</sup> This quote originally described the pioneering dancer Martha Graham. Agnes De Mille, *Martha: The Life and Work of Martha Graham* (New York: Random House, 1991).