

On an architectural journey

A couple's new home in Sweden has strong ties to a structure in Spain

BY IAN VOLNER

Lise Coirier was standing in the middle of a curious circular house, looking out at the rugged landscape of eastern Spain. The Belgium-based art historian, magazine publisher and (with her husband, Gian Giuseppe Simeone) gallery owner buttonholed her longtime friend Kersten Geers, who had designed the building with his business partner David Van Severen.

As Mr. Geers recalls it, “Lise said mysteriously: ‘If we ever do a holiday house, we want you guys to do it.’”

Over the next six years, the palsturned-collaborators have found their way from that concrete-and-glass enclosure about two hours from Barcelona to a very different house in an altogether different place: central Sweden. There the duo from OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen has just wrapped up work on the couple's new vacation home, an elegant, enigmatic box that the designers call 25 Columns. For all the



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distance between them, the two structures — one a bagel on a mesa, the other a forest-bound cube — remain deeply connected. “Somehow there's this parallel,” Mr. Van Severen said.

The project that first fired Mr. Simeone's and Ms. Coirier's imaginations represented a major milestone for its architects, whose Brussels studio has been well regarded by design-world insiders since its founding in 2002. Eight years into their joint practice, Mr. Van Severen and Mr. Geers were awarded the Silver Lion for most promising young participants at the Venice Architecture Biennale. A series of prominent commissions followed, including a housing complex in Paris and a media center in Switzerland.

But the 2,000-square-foot house in the remote Spanish region of Matarraña

presented the practice with an opportunity no public client (and few private ones) ever would. The project's developers “basically gave us carte blanche,” Mr. Van Severen said, a chance for the architects to strut their avant-garde stuff.

They opted, characteristically, for restraint. Solo House, as the project is called, is a 150-foot-diameter loop, perforated at intervals by voids and recesses. At its center is a half-wild courtyard, whose brushy surroundings make it strangely in sync with the interior space. As Mr. Geers described it, “The difference between inside and outside becomes ambiguous.” Although that can often be a goal for many architects, the accomplishment of Solo House was aided by the vast plateau upon which it appears almost to hover.

The encounter with Solo House convinced Mr. Simeone and Ms. Coirier that OFFICE could bring their Nordic dream to life.

“My father is Italian, but my mother is from Stockholm,” said Mr. Simeone, 58, who's been married to the French-born Ms. Coirier, 53, since 1997. “We've gotten in the habit of going to Sweden once or twice a year.” (Together he and Ms. Coirier founded the Spazio Nobile design studio in Brussels. Mr. Simeone, an archaeologist, also consults on cultural issues for the European Commission.) With their strong connection to the Swedish countryside, the pair had been giving serious consideration to building their own getaway there, a place to enjoy with their two daughters, who are now 22 and 25.

“David knows the area,” said Ms.

Coirier, who had spent time with Mr. Van Severn at the Simeone clan's previous house in Sweden some years earlier. The architects' familiarity with the locale as well as with the family seemed to make them an obvious choice — though there were challenges, especially after the Covid pandemic prevented the team from traveling to the hillside plot the clients had acquired outside the tiny village of Tallberg.

“We designed the project without visiting the site,” Mr. Geers said. “We only saw it in pictures.” At just over half an acre, the parcel was far more compact than the one in Matarraña, as well as more hemmed in by its neighbors, most of them gabled Swedish cottages of traditional red clapboard.

And then there was the interpersonal aspect. “It can be very difficult some-

times to work with friends,” Ms. Coirier observed. To avoid potential conflict, she and Mr. Simeone agreed to the same terms as their counterparts in Spain, giving OFFICE full rein to do as it saw fit.

Absent any other constraints, the designers began with the facts on the ground gathered from photos and Mr. Van Severen's prior sojourns. On the one hand, there was the water: In a country of lakes, Siljan in the rural Dalarna province is one of Sweden's largest, formed by an ancient meteor. On the other hand, there was the slope dropping off sharply from the adjacent road. The topography promised commanding views, provided that the building could navigate the treacherous elevation. “It was very important to find our position on the hill,” Mr. Van Severen said. “We wanted the house to feel like it belonged to the lake.”

The final design pushed the building down from the lip of the ridge, hiding it from its neighbors, and vice versa, to establish a remarkably intimate connection to the glassy Siljan about a mile and a half to the west. On the face of the gradient, the architects embedded the house's primary structural element: 25 thick tubular piers, made from sturdy (and highly sustainable) cross-laminated timber, set at 11-foot increments in a rigid 45-foot-by-45-foot grid.

“The columns in some sense reflect the forest,” Mr. Geers said. “They're pieces of nature.” With its glass exterior and wood-paneled trim above and below, 25 Columns is a kind of ultracontemporary treehouse, with a staircase to its rooftop terrace standing in for the conventional ladder.

The interior layout is accordingly spare — a central living space, flanked by three modest bedrooms plus an enclosed winter garden, all pressed to the perimeter and separated only by glazed partitions with custom curtains from Kvadrat — emphasizing communal living. Yet within the 2,000-square-foot space, Ms. Coirier and Mr. Simeone have created an eclectic shrine to their highly cultivated tastes.

Pieces in the same spirit as their Spazio Nobile exhibition, including a sculptural fireplace designed by Bela Silva and pendants by Philipp Weber, enliven the family room and make for a domestic environment as striking as the natural one visible at every turn through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Insulated against the elements, those windows keep the house comfortable year-round, and the family is already preparing for a winter trip after their first stay over the summer.

“The architecture is strong, even radical,” Ms. Coirier acknowledged. Nonetheless, she said, the house feels very much like home. “We hug the columns.”

Turning Solo House inside out, 25 Columns represents a progression of the probing, abstract approach taken by the architects. On the precipitous incline beneath the Swedish house, they replaced the rocks that had been removed during construction, as if the little round courtyard in Spain had been stretched and carried halfway across a continent.

Inspired

Left, the 25 Columns house in Sweden was designed by OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen for Lise Coirier and her husband, Gian Giuseppe Simeone. Below, from far left: Solo House in Spain, also designed by OFFICE; Mr. Simeone and Ms. Coirier at Spazio Nobile in Brussels; and the central living space of 25 Columns, which overlooks the forest and a lake. The tubular timber piers are two of 25 that constitute the house's primary structural element.

Big impact in a small apartment

In Madrid, bold colors and common materials set a studio apart

BY JOANN PLOCKOVA

When the architect Ximena Zenteno Ladrón de Guevara gets a peek inside her neighbors' apartments in Madrid, she feels a sense of joy about her own.

“When you see the typical kind of old apartment, where you can see the fridge and you can see, like, right away, everything,” she said, “I feel happier.”

What Ms. de Guevara gets when she opens the door to her own apartment is the element of surprise she was after when she commissioned the local architecture studio OOIIO to redesign the approximately 538-square-foot studio apartment in Madrid's Carabanchel district. Once a working-class neighborhood, it has become an enclave for artists, writers and architects like Ms. de Guevara.

“You don't expect this kind of apartment in a small place, in a neighborhood like this,” said Ms. de Guevara, 35, who is originally from Peru. “I like that. I wanted it to be a surprise.”

A surprise, indeed. The compact apartment, which is longer than it is wide and has just one window, is a vibrant blend of blush, berry, teal, turquoise and mustard yellow accents employed in curvaceous built-in furniture and nearly floor-to-ceiling ceramic tiles.

“We love colors in the studio,” said the architect Joaquín Millán Villamuelas, founder and creative director of OOIIO, which is also in Carabanchel. “We try to escape from the regular palette of grays, creamy beige. And we always try to go extra far.”

Ms. de Guevara bought the apartment after nearly a year back in Peru,



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where she had spent some time to work and to update her visa. The apartment was relatively new, but she didn't like the interior. “I didn't like the idea that all of them were the same,” she said.

She had been living in a larger apartment in Peru and had to adapt to living in a much smaller space. “I didn't want to feel uncomfortable,” she said. “I needed to make it special, so I wouldn't feel that I'm just in a room.”

An architect who has worked mainly in the materials industry, Ms. de Guevara met Mr. Villamuelas a decade ago at an architectural event she organized and has collaborated on projects with OOIIO.

“He likes to do different things all the time,” Ms. de Guevara said, even though the projects OOIIO works on are often small and challenging. “I needed that.”

Playing with colors and materials in



unexpected ways is a signature of OOIIO. Founded during the financial crisis, the firm learned how to make working with less look like more. “We are specializing in really getting our projects to a very low budget,” Mr. Villamuelas said. “And when you see it, you don't feel that; you think that it's even more expensive.”

That was the goal with Ms. de Guevara's apartment, he said, where the idea was “to get something unique, but very low budget.” The completely customized apartment includes an Ikea kitchen personalized with wood panels in colors that match the apartment's bright color scheme.

Tailor-made built-in furniture — including an arched nook with shelving and storage that houses a Murphy bed, geometric pieces that offer both form and function as a means to distinguish the living room, and a half-sun-shape panel in a corner in the kitchen that clev-

erly hides cables — is made from laminated low-cost laser-cut fiberboard in turquoise.

“But it's not expensive because the materials are cheap,” said Mr. Villamuelas, who also noted that the studio had built up relationships with low-cost laser cutters through the years. “And because you can use these like regular catalog colors that no one uses — because who buys this crazy blue for your bedroom?” he joked, adding, “Everyone wants the typical oak, which is more expensive.”

The apartment reflects the architect's prolific use of glazed ceramic tiles in bold colors. There's berry in the bathroom, blush pink on the kitchen backsplash and the entire wall on one side, and teal running halfway up the wall from the curved entry to the newly installed window that opens onto the Juliet balcony on the other side (not to mention the floors).

The style speaks to OOIIO's main tool for achieving a distinctive look on a low budget. “Just using styles that you can buy in any material shop, but using them with a different way of playing with color, locating them in a special location where you usually don't see it,” Mr. Villamuelas said. “Then you can get something different.”

Completed in less than a year, the renovation cost 32,650 euros (about \$35,210, including the loose furniture, which OOIIO selected to complete the look).

Surprisingly, Ms. de Guevara said she was “not that colorful, actually.” After a moment of hesitation, however, she let the studio do its thing.

“I didn't expect all the mixture and the match,” she said. “So it was kind of like, ‘OK; this is a lot, let me breathe for a while.’”

“And then I was like, ‘OK, I trust you, so why not.’ In the end, the tiles and the color are the essence of the apartment.”

Color stories

Ximena Zenteno Ladrón de Guevara's studio apartment by OOIIO Architecture in the Carabanchel neighborhood of Madrid. The firm used colors and common materials in the small space in unexpected ways, including laser-cut fiberboard in turquoise, left, and glazed ceramic tiles in teal, right.