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## **El Elefante Blanco, living the unusual**

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*This paper aims to provide an outline of the work that was initiated during the final project of my research program in architecture focused on theoretical design production in a project. The city, during its evolutionary processes produces abandoned zones that often contain buildings. These structures are considered structurally unsuitable, economically unviable and left to lasting abandonment. However, in some cases, these architectural structures are resurrected as a result of community initiatives or through the efforts of the inhabitants themselves. Based on my experience of the abandoned structure known as El Elefante Blanco in Buenos Aires, this article examines the position of the architect and shows the influence of reading context in the development of new design tools for recycling the city. In this context, the issue of indecision and appropriation seems to correspond to architectural design categories for which the evolution of abandoned architectural structures provides an improved understanding.*

Keywords: *Abandon, reuse, architectural design, indecision, appropriation*

### **1 An introduction to the contemporary issue of abandoned urban architectural works**

Is there anyone who does not wonder upon seeing the immense outlines of abandoned buildings at the centre of major cities worldwide? Generally giving rise to fascination, indignation, perplexity and moralization, these contemporary structures also serve as objects of wonder, curiosity and study for architect.

#### **1.1 Abandoned spaces, context of urban design**

The presence of vacant spaces in cities supports the process of urban evolution, serving as a catalyst for regeneration and morphogenesis, making it possible for a city to be continually rebuilt on itself. Vacate spaces are therefore necessary and often strategic because the period during which these spaces remain vacant is limited, selected and predetermined when incorporated in a scheme of planned urban evolution. A balance is installed giving rise to a certain harmony between the container and the contained, between dynamism and inertia. However, certain areas experience prolonged inactivity having left a classical system and entered into lasting abandonment. The term “abandoned” then becomes polysemous: undefined territory, unconstructable interstices, undefined margins, abandoned buildings, and vestiges of forgotten or aborted activities. Because it is numerous, of an infinite variety, the suspended space is “undefinable” [13]. Chaline recalls that: “very few cities (...) do not witness the creation and persistence of abandoned territory or abandoned buildings” [8]. Paradoxically, if the increase in empty spaces - physical as well as functional – results in a banalisation and a globalization of this phenomenon, questions concerning the extraordinary nature of these spaces invariably persist.

Writings reporting processes of urban morphogenesis occurring up to the beginning of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century systematically connect the rise of abandoned areas to historic events that often occur rapidly on a massive scale. Hence in connection with urban regeneration, Chaline identifies declines in religious influences, the post-industrial degeneration of the 1950s, the calling into question of the port model and an initial replacement of the military domain as principal purveyors of urban wastelands.

Even today, the number of abandoned spaces continues to increase<sup>1</sup>. New contemporary levers seem to encourage their appearance. The economic crisis which began in 2000 and worsened in 2008 has indeed hastened the appearance of new abandoned spaces as can be seen from these new European cities which have become ghost towns<sup>2</sup>. The poor financial viability of a space in the view of a society removes it from the market and confirms its status as an abandoned property.

## 1.2 From abandoned wasteland to abandoned architectural structures

Although built and unbuilt abandoned structures do occur together and present abandoned stigmas, the present article will engage in questioning the architectural practice relating to abandoned buildings that we shall describe as *abandoned architectural structures*.

Paradoxically, these architectural structures, deserted following years of use or built to an incomplete stage, are often resurrected as a result of community initiatives or through the efforts of the inhabitants themselves.

The exploration of previous studies and of research documenting the regeneration of abandoned structures has made it possible to chart a keen interest in the architectural discipline in relation to these urban objects and helps to identify a contemporary turning point in understanding their potential.

In 1962, the architect Jacob Bakema documented an abandoned Roman palace functioning as a supporting structure for a small town [1]. The attention paid to these urban metamorphoses increased in 1966 with Aldo Rossi, who in his “L’architettura della città” sees in the inhabitants’ occupational phenomena of arenas located in Nîmes and Arles, unusual urban occurrences or events which overturned the initial function of architecture [37]. This observation is reinforced by Herman Hertzberger who identifies in these phenomena a demonstration of the resident interpretation of a given architectural form [22].

More recently, the study of these occupations increased as a result of the deterioration caused by the global economic crisis. The architects Lacaton and Vassal state that the economic crisis has a tendency to upset certainty, “to cause a shift in the dominant discourse (...) by lending more credibility to alternative research, (...) by providing a greater legitimacy to new and pragmatic approaches of experiments and economy of complexity” [26].

In 1999, the French collective “Coloco” was formed to develop the “skeleton project” aiming to archive and document large abandoned structures that had been regenerated by inhabitants<sup>3</sup>. This action research

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<sup>1</sup> In relation to this issue, the architect Patrick Bouchain recalls that “the creation of ten hectares of urbanization in Ile-de France is accompanied by 2.5 hectares of vacant land” [4]. See [4] and [5] for information on his projects relating to the redevelopment of wastelands.

<sup>2</sup> The issue of new Spanish ghost towns has been adequately documented with notable references in [36] and [38].

<sup>3</sup> For notable references see “Habiter les squelettes” whose archives are public and available online [45].

was soon followed by other initiatives around the world: the Urban-Think Tank group studied the resident reinvestment of Torre David in Caracas [7], Maíra Machado Martins documented a former factory which was occupied in Rio de Janeiro [30], Justin McGuirk travelled through South America to report on these “radical” resident occupations [32], etc.

These contemporary observations share a fascination for the informal reclaiming of large architectural structures. Nevertheless, they seem to remain detached from analyses focusing on the relationship between form and new features. This article, on the contrary, proposes to question the expression of multiple individual appropriations from a fixed architectural form. To approach these inhabitants’ appropriations, the experimentation is chosen within the framework of the architectural diploma project. In situ experience is advanced as the key in reading these reinvestments.

How might the renewal of abandoned architectural structures of the contemporary city stimulate a reinvented relationship between mankind and the city? What alternative visions with standard design procedures might they deliver?

## **2 Considering the requalification of El Elefante Blanco: research methods**

This second part focuses on the methodological involvement of the experiment. The work carried out in El Elefante Blanco was based on a pragmatic inductive approach. All knowledge was obtained first-hand during long periods of immersive onsite research in the building and surrounding areas and supplemented by archives furnished by the City of Buenos Aires and Nation of Argentina.

### **2.1 Elefante Blanco, Buenos Aires’ symbolic abandoned structure**

*El Elefante Blanco* is the name bestowed upon uncompleted fourteen-story structure overlooking the southern districts of the Argentinian capital. Discovered through Pablo Trapero’s eponymous film (2013), the building served as the field of study for the project. Begun in 1937 with the stated goal of becoming the largest hospital in South America, only 80% of its construction was ever completed.

Although this building is a symbolic abandoned structure, it is also located at the centre of a larger abandoned urban zone: Villa 15. This slum, known as the “Ciudad Oculta” or “the hidden city”, has developed rapidly since the 80s [3]. Its population is currently estimated at 20,000 and mainly consists of Argentinian, Bolivian and Paraguayan families. El Elefante Blanco shelters eighty-eight families on its three lower floors and presently symbolizes the shift from formal to informal architecture.

In what manner could a rehabilitation of the inhabited concrete skeleton be achieved?

### **2.2 Immersion, a reading tool for complex context**

Visiting the “unmapped” spaces of the city, whose absence from conventional urban representations was noted by Philippe Vasset [43], I was confronted with the absence of specific information on the building known as El Elefante Blanco: no plan or information relating to the families living in the building for twenty years exist. Neither is there any mention of Villa 15 in the cadastral plans of the city of Buenos Aires. It is represented by an extensive white area rather than an informal neighbourhood of 20,000 people. The

“Ciudad Oculta” remains invisible in the city’s official records, its informality condemning it to a lack of representation. In spite of the fact that the building was part of an initiative in 2007 aiming to make it a functional structure in its entirety, it found itself once more consigned to obscurity as a result of a wide-reaching corruption scandal that political imbroglíos continue to encourage.

El Elefante Blanco is sensitive territory, in the sense that it “involves illegal or informal practices of individuals subject to high levels of stigma and circumstances involving violence, danger and/or suffering” [6]. The immersive working methods on critical territory inherited from anthropology and inflected by architectural discipline, influences the development of design tools.

Firstly, gaining access to the site requires significant effort on the part of the researcher and commences even before arrival in the field, in order to negotiate the terms of continued onsite presence. The engagement effort intensifies once immersion begins. Six weeks of continuous presence in El Elefante Blanco was required for the compilation of this study. The immersion was accompanied by transparency towards inhabitants regarding the purpose of my work and impartial positioning towards highly politicized institutions working in the area. This last point reminds us that research is never carried out by a sole individual. The concept of triangulation is invariably proven by the involvement of collateral actors (institutions, NGOs, politicians, the local mafia, etc.) since a report generated by a researcher who remains isolated and outside his field of study is neither tenable, efficient, nor reliable.

Seeking a horizontal exchange relationship was particularly encouraged, as part of this project, through the use of comprehensive interviews [25] and recognition of gift-counter-gift patterns [31], as catalysts of social life.

Working on this informal structure, located in a slum of Buenos Aires, raised an extremely constrained economic social and urban framework. How to lay the foundations of a project? How could accurate design tools be gathered and considered?

### **2.3 The ‘already-there’ as a conceptual framework**

In 2005, the architect Constantin Petcou, co-founder of AAA explained that “the role of (our) interventions in these places was not to participate in their ‘urban regeneration’, but to contribute to forming connections between already existing qualities and differences” [35]. This quote lays the foundation for a break with the so-called conventional urban regeneration methods and announces the beginning of a different urban fabric, attentive to the existing situation.

The abandoned structure is a strong example of the ‘already-there’. It served as a starting point for the project and reinforced Petcou’s goal that interventions should concentrate on enhancing the ‘already-there’ without diminishing it. To quote the words of Françoise Fromonot on the issue of “revelation urban planning” it involved “prioritizing the intervention site and obtaining from its substrate the principles of its transformations. Through the deciphering of (its) nature, the patient extrapolation of (its) intrinsic qualities, the location (is) thus led to locally generate (its) own evolutionary program” [16].

The project should make it possible to notably examine the potential of the built skeleton’s construction system, the specifics of El Elefante Blanco’s hygienist hospital architecture and the human resources



deployed in and around this abandoned structure. Due to economy of the existing site, it was necessary to work with what was readily available before considering the intervention isolated from its context. The project by the “economy of means” is then perceived as another way of creating architecture rather than a strict financial imperative. Economics is advanced as a vector of efficiency, precision and accuracy.

#### **2.4 Action in Non-action**

This attention paid to the ‘already-there’ can be seen in the project through the use of design principles leading to the amplification of available potential. The prolongation or intensification of an organizational, morphic, functional character responds to the axis of this project. Similarly, the “copy and paste” principle may be used since the decryption of the context results in the highlighting of satisfactory existing circumstances. It must not be understood as proliferative and simplistic repetition of a neutral pattern, but as the reuse of local elements observed in context. The origin of the mutation, integrated into a natural and familiar movement, could hardly be attributed to the architect. Non-action (Wu-Wei) is one of Taoism’s basic tenets. It is not passivity, immobility, fatalism, but effective non-action, like gently flowing water that is able to overcome the hardest and strongest obstacles, allowing nature to work, without forcing it. There is then not a question of stasis, but of activity produced in accordance with the natural impulse of the environment.

Applied to architectural and urban design, “action in non-action” encourages a deep understanding of a territory in order to guide its evolution. In this regard, the philosopher Manuel De Landa defines “*contraintes de proscription*” (proscriptive constraints) that he contrasts with prescriptive constraints. The former focuses on what should be avoided as opposed to simply leaning towards what should be done: “not what to do, but what to avoid doing” [12]. This orientation is intensified by Daniel Estevez who recalled that in this type of approach, flexibility comes from the manoeuvring allowances available within a representation or design system structured by interval and fragmentation [15].

Although the final result is neither known nor has been prematurely sought [29], a methodological protocol has nevertheless been implemented. The knowledge tool used was the inventory. A detailed, accurate inventory, completed over a considerable period of observation. This tool makes it possible to document a situation in a precise manner and encourages learning through observation of the environment in order to identify room to manoeuvre. The initiated design process is then linked to a concrete experience, a familiarization conditioned by the physical immersion of the researcher onsite with a focus on detail. In this way, the context and the designer engage in a mutual exchange in which the project defines itself.

A survey of the primary reinforced concrete structure of the building and of the self-built secondary structure, developed over the years of occupation by the inhabitants, was conducted. This secondary structure does not necessarily match the spatial organization planned for the hospital: it is an ever-changing, flowing, hybrid reality. In parallel with the structural survey, an inventory of activities, institutions and dynamic inhabitants of the wider community was compiled and interviews with each family living in the building were conducted. Only through such work can the designer obtain a better knowledge of the history and life in El Elefante Blanco.

## 2.5 The actualisation of structuralist thought

The distinction made here between the “primary” and “secondary” structures is fundamental. It helps to define an architectural position that can be correlated to the concept of structuralism as defended by the Dutch architect Herman Hertzberger [22]. He builds an analogy between *langue* (language system), *parole* (act of speaking) and architecture, based on the origin of structuralist thought from the social sciences. He examines the concepts of *competence* and *performance* developed by Chomsky: “competence is the knowledge that a person has of their own language system, performance refers to manner in which they make use of this knowledge in a given situation” [22]. In El Elefante Blanco, the primary structure is *competence*; none of the uses inventoried today in the building were expected when it was originally designed. It is the structure’s intrinsic competence that allows for the current programmatic diversity. As for *performance*, it must be linked with different interpretations of use that the inhabitants have built from the original frame of the building. Thus for example, while a double height has made it possible to build a dwelling with a wooden mezzanine on the ground floor of the building, inhabitants preferred to keep the free 5.80 meters sub-ceilings in the canteen *El Comedor El Elefante Blanco*, in order to ensure better kitchen ventilation.

The intersection of these two structures leads to the identification of a reciprocity between form and function: the form does not unilaterally determine use, but is itself influenced by lived experiences.

The interest of the work carried out on El Elefante Blanco also lies in the enrichment of the structuralist axis on which a new contemporary stratum is superimposed. The issue of abandoned structures actually results in the reuse of existing structures as the backbone of the project. It no longer requires the design of a new primary structure capable of supporting the development of a secondary performance, but to be able, as a designer, to read the existing structure, to diagnose its ability and to mobilize interpretative resources from it. The project must develop the “capability” [19] of the building to open the field to future uses.

## 3 An incremental approach in action

Conducted concurrently with the inventory cataloguing, a perspective of iterative work reflecting the concept of incrementalism suggested by Lucien Kroll was undertaken: “incrementalism is a work method consisting of the addition to a project of several small changes rather than a few huge leaps. It is a design approach in which processes are progressively modified by trampling. The changes are very light, but their accumulation can lead to a radical change through the accumulation of imperceptible changes<sup>4</sup>”. Hence the project proposes a series of initial changes structured around five major themes.

### 3.1 Adding value to action: an audacious third-knowledge

The first theme of intervention follows Patrick Bouchain’s ‘third-knowledge’ concept, borrowed from Gilles Clement’s ‘third-landscape’ concept [10]. The audacious third-knowledge observed in the building relates to the scalability and spontaneity in the permanent building transformation: accommodation is

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<sup>4</sup> Lucien Kroll gives this definition at Foraine University’s opening day (project at the initiative of Patrick Bouchain for bringing to life three abandoned architectural structures at Rennes), Saint-Jacques de La Lande, France, 22 November 2012.

divided, created in certain instances, corridors are sealed off. The living unit adapts to it almost spontaneously on each occasion.

The housing units are dynamic, self-built entities in which constructive involvement does not remain fixed but rather ever-changing. The inhabitants of El Elefante Blanco have transformed the initial purpose of the building through their use of it, out of necessity, in a creative manner. It seems important that the project adds value and extends this constructive dynamism, which is why it suggests that “plots” of large surfaces be delineated and allocated, rather than provide finished accommodation. The secondary partitioning is then left to the free creativity of the resident.

The strengthening of a distinction between a *primary-competence-structure* and *secondary-performance-structure* enables the stimulation of self-building and is accompanied by the empowerment of the user. Indeed, “additional empowerment leads to additional motivation and releases an energy that a centralized decision-making system aims to suppress” [22]. Borrowing from the writings of John Turner [42], Paolo Freire, Hannah Arendt and Guillermo Marzioni, this emancipatory empowerment is based on a rebalancing of designer-user power relations. By recognizing a value in the making [39] and popular knowledge, the design process favours self-building by the inhabitants and a process of reflection on their living environment, with the intention of transforming it. Thus, it generates an empowerment praxis which is built around *user-friendly tools* in the Illichien sense: to be user friendly, the tool must not create inequality, must encourage autonomy and increase everyone's action field over reality [24].

### **3.2 Supporting institutions and dynamic inhabitants: creative self-management**

Supporting existing institutions by enhancing creative self-management has been a key point for the proposed project. Behind the inertia of its monumental entrance façade, everyday life is observable in El Elefante Blanco. Its self-organized inhabitants have renovated the structure's direct surroundings (a repair garage for cars, sports fields and a play-area for children) and open spaces are just as occupied as the building's interior. The inhabitants have worked simultaneously to accord equal attention to apartments and the street. “Paying equal attention to housing and street alike means treating the street not merely as the residual space between housing blocks, but rather as a fundamentally complementary element, spatially dialogue between inhabitants to take place. The street was, originally, the space for actions” [21].

Inside the skeleton, living quarters exist side-by-side with small institutions: the hairdressing salon, the sports room and the canteen. This institutional structure is mobile, partially invisible, but has a high impact on the building and surroundings and enhanced the inhabitants' daily lives. The group of existing institutions is preserved in the rehabilitation project, while others are moved. The sports room, for example, located in a windowless room is relocated to the tenth floor with an unobstructed view of the city and large spaces; others such as the restaurant, are extended. Newly created institutions exist in an embryonic state. The nursery service, for example, is not formalized, but currently exists through neighbourly relations. These institutions are active and productive: they provide knowledge exchange and facilitate community (eating, meeting, resolving disagreements, etc.). In this sense, they can be compared to the reflections of the educator Fernand Oury who defines the institution as “a mediation system in which people no longer just exist face to face, but speak about something that exists and work on something that exists outside of them and for which they are responsible” [34]. This attention paid to strengthening the existing institutional

structure may be compared with the American concept of “community empowerment” [33], which aims to build a collective power generated, in part by the meeting, exchange and interaction of inhabitants within decision-making spaces such as institutions.

### 3.3 Making life safer: a collective benevolence

The third theme focuses on “making living safer”. Villa 15 and more specifically El Elefante Blanco are scenes of daily violence caused largely by the local drug trafficking activities. The building is a receptacle of neighbourhood violence and families are regularly robbed even within their homes.

This violence affects dwelling practices since the inhabitants seal off the windows of their homes on the lower floors. While I was drawing the plans of a resident’s apartment on the ground floor, the woman mentioned to me that she would rather not have any windows since witnessing the daily violence taking place in the street might make her the target of retaliatory attacks.

To make living safer, architecture promoting *collective benevolence* was deployed. In this regard, the South African architect Carin Smuts explains that “in connection with the vernacular issue, there is the traditional importance of interspaces, these spaces where social interaction freely occurs. (...) The question of in-between spaces refers to that of the safety of the public space: in these places, nothing can happen, because each individual is under the gaze of someone else. It is when these spaces are placed in isolation or remain out of view that (violence) takes place. The in-between space provides protection due to the constant presence of someone else’s gaze and light” [40].

Recognizing the harsh reality of daily life in Villa 15, the project does not propose to keep any housing on the ground floor and instead dedicates the entrance pavilion to communal life in order to create an intermediary zone between the street and the home. In addition, based on the building’s five main staircases, the common floor is split into five independent sub-divisions making it possible to limit the cross-flow and promote appropriation of the inhabited area. Finally, the analysis of what is already there revealed a gradation of spaces between the public and the private. This gradation very often presents a servicing area, and a “semi-private” in-between area used by three to four families. This series of spaces characterized by degrees of accessibility, supervision, accountability and varied use shows a gradation of “territorial claims” [22]. This gradation involving degrees of differentiated appropriation is included in the project.

The increase in the degree of accessibility of places contributes to the development of a safer existence. Floors not only make it possible to consider “in-between” areas, they also serve to drive the notion of “dailyness” [2], understood as the creation of a safer family environment. According to Bruce Bégout, the author of this neologism, everyday life is not a reality to which one submits: the inhabitant takes an active position to invent and build his or her own daily basis. In doing so, they seek familiarity, benchmarks and a sense of security. The project axes developed in the rehabilitation of El Elefante Blanco promote appropriation of more defined living spaces in order to provide the basis of a safer everyday life.

### 3.4 Encouraging rural lifestyles: the Cartoneros

“Cartoneros” is the name given to an occupation developed following the crisis of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century in Buenos Aires [18]. Several inhabitants of El Elefante Blanco practice this occupation which involves the

organized collection of waste paper and derivatives for resale. Collections are made using a cart which may be pulled by a horse or more commonly, by the Cartoneros themselves. Any project on El Elefante Blanco should make the building accessible to these families.

Thus, a storage space served by a new access ramp is created on the ground floor, making it possible for Cartoneros to store their collections between resale opportunities. In addition, a freight elevator of ten square meters is put into service at the centre of the building, making it possible for carts - even horses - to access the upper floors and terraces. El Elefante Blanco thus gains with regards to accessibility; the upper floors are as accessible as the ground floor. The project leads to the notion of an “inhabited landscape”, El Elefante Blanco as a mountain to inhabit.

### **3.5 Testing a structural didactic**

El Elefante Blanco was constructed with the stated goal to provide a specialist hospital program catering to patients affected by tuberculosis. The programmatic features from this first mission are still readable in the building’s structure: a replication of vertical circulation, significant sub-floor heights, the width of corridors capable of allowing the passage of stretchers, ambulances access ramps, hygienist balconies, etc. The building’s incompleteness and the long period of abandonment have resulted in the loss of a large part of its finishing elements such as doors, windows, and aesthetic finishes. The current architecture of El Elefante Blanco represents the original constructive skeleton and is adorned with a didactic force. Large open plan spaces, in very good condition in spite of having been abandoned for eighty years, have high ceilings and extend to the outside through several balconies: open spaces that are reminiscent of the concept of a slightly partitioned loft, bright and double-oriented. Although the service passages originally planned for the hospital were long central closed corridors, the project includes column alignments within apartments and makes balconies connecting the new service passages to homes. The apartments created in the El Elefante Blanco project are thus connected, bright and large. They are capable of sheltering 400 families or more than 1,500 people, the project reduces the density of the habitation even though significantly increasing the density of the area.

## **4 Conclusions and Recommendations**

This article replaces the problem of large abandoned urban architectural structures in a contemporary context affected by the economic crisis. Although the hope of a conventional and planned reevaluation of these architectural structures grows distant, resident initiatives, often self-managed, are emerging. Perhaps ironically, it is often individual initiatives and community efforts that bring these colossal structures back to life.

Within contexts severely affected by the crisis, these inhabitant occupations of large abandoned structures are driven by forces that seem incompatible with conventional planning tools. Leaving behind anticipatory and deterministic logic, these architectural structures jeopardise usual research and project practices. Retracing the experimental methods around which this fieldwork was built, the article outlines the contours of the architect’s position in order to understand these inhabited territories and follow their changes. In this context, the issue of indecision and appropriation seems to correspond to new architectural design

categories for which the evolution of abandoned architectural structures provides an improved understanding.

#### **4.1 Conclusions: appropriation understood as design**

In 1985, Jacques Hondelatte stated that he dreamed of living in the Taj Mahal [23], following which the architect Frederic Druot questioned our ability to inhabit that which is not meant for habitation [14]. Paul Virilio's invitation to "Live the unusual" [44] met this same opening towards a new field of habitation. Finally, Lacaton and Vassal suggested in 2011 that places built "for another program whose spaces (are) atypical, heterogeneous, oversized (...) can be reused (and) show the way to surprising living arrangements" [26]. Following the example of these architects, could we not consider the highly appropriable character of what paradoxically seems abandoned?

The work on El Elefante Blanco consisted of a living laboratory to consider the potential for provided by the former hospital. During the 1970s, Herman Hertzberger expressed his disagreement with the excesses of neutrality or, conversely, hyper-specialization observed in architectural production. He then suggested that "the problem of a building's convertibility does not lie in the fact that its distinctive features must be changed, but in the fact that it must possess some at the beginning" [22].

This statement raises the issue of building reuse less in terms of its previous function than in terms of available potential, existing singularities and possibilities of future appropriation. In this sense, El Elefante Blanco provides a favoured territory for the unusual. A rare vestige of mono-block hospital architecture<sup>5</sup>, the building presents a unique architectural quality, borrowing its codes from Soviet palaces as much as from European hygienist buildings. This architectural richness, intersecting with the atypical image of the inhabited mountain, gives rise to the belief that the building is capable of generating its own story and its own myth. Appropriation understood as design shows the way of going beyond standard methods and preconceived ideas.

#### **4.2 Involvement: "What if this was not done?"**

Project limits must be promptly established by the architect. The potential of El Elefante Blanco's original architecture allows the marking out of the project's boundaries to the spatial limits of different accommodations. Extensive conditions of freedom are then released according to the scale of the home. A similar approach was observed during the project for the Fort-L'empereur developed by Le Corbusier in Algiers in 1930 or during the research of the architect Yona Friedman on appropriable structures.

Referring to the political arts, Bruno Latour suggested that: "the political arts must hesitate, grope, experiment, correct, continuously restart, and constantly refresh the work of composition. Every preoccupation, every matter, every object, everything, every "issue" and every concern: it will be necessary to begin again. There is nothing that may be transported as it is from one situation to another; adjustment

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<sup>5</sup> In this regard we shall refer to the Beaujon Hospital (Paris, France). Hospital Beaujon, is the work of the architect Jean Walter (1933), it is the first "hospital-block" or "vertical hospital." It is the first mono-block, non-residential hospital whose thirteen floors were intended to combine the economic benefits of a vertical structure and the hygienic virtues of altitude. It is the direct European counterpart to El Elefante Blanco (built 4 years later).

will be required in each instance and not application, discovery and not deduction, specifying and not generalising, describing – describing first of all. They are precisely arts, artifices, tricks, skills, crafts, practices - not sciences” [28].

This positioning can be transposed to architectural design, especially when it relates to abandoned structures. It seems that understanding each new project by starting out with the assumption that nothing is known or transposable and that only the experience can provide the keys to understand and act, is the position of an appropriately involved designer. This position is nevertheless confusing and occasionally uncomfortable for the person who assumes it. It is not easy to leave out the “already-known” in order to document the “already-there” that appears complex, changeable and unique. It is not easier *a priori* to think of the project in its incompleteness and its permanent scalability.

In 1991, the landscape architect Gilles Clément suggested renewing garden design methods by taking inspiration from wastelands: a living space left to the free development of those who settle there [9]. The “garden in motion” he proposes is a changing place whose development is only inflected by the gardener, never imposed. El Elefante Blanco is an example of a wild landscape “in motion”. A refuge for families who are also abandoned, its incompleteness has enabled a rich inhabitant appropriation.

The architectural design developed here, based on “action in non-action”, is translated through intervention in which, by its simplicity and delicacy, it seems to disappear, in order to only leave the user with the benefit of earned use. A design-pleasure. “The usual way to develop a method involves asking oneself “What if this was tried?” or “what if that was tried?” introducing a variety of techniques one after the other. This is modern agriculture and its sole result is to make the farmer busier. I chose the opposite approach. I aspired to an enjoyable and natural means of cultivating which would make the work easier and not harder. “What if this was not done? What if that was not done?” That was the mind-set I had.” [17].

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