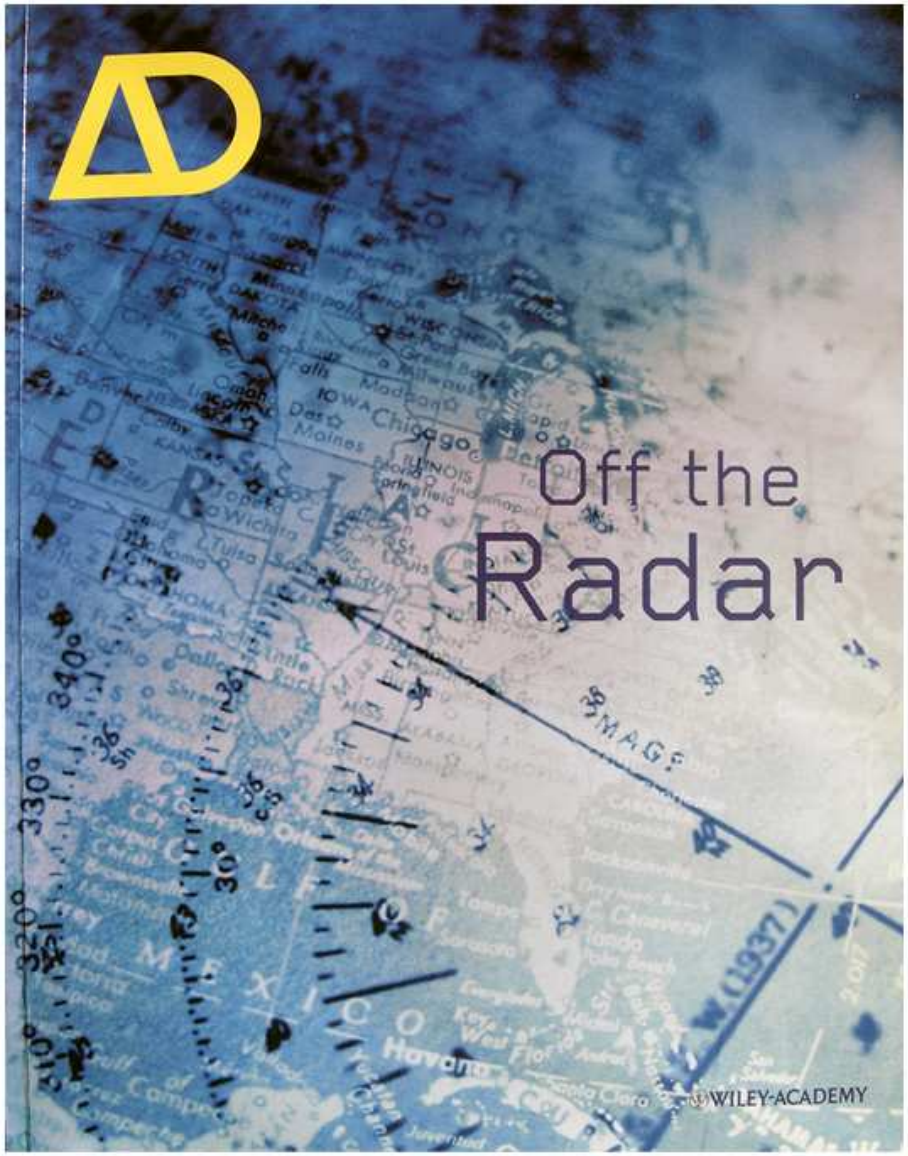
ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN
OFF THE RADAR VOL 73 NO 1

29 43 : CHILE, PLENITUDE, TIME AND EMPTINESS OF SPACE.
GERMAN DEL SOL IN CONVERSATION WITH ANNETTE LECUYER AND BRIAN CARTER

2003 JAN FEB
WILLEY ACADEMY
LONDON, UK



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Chile

Geographically, Chile is both one of the most attenuated and isolated nations on earth. Almost 4000 kilometres long – equivalent to the distance from Scotland to Nigeria – it is a country that is on average only 120 kilometres wide. Although now connected by the north–south line of the Pan-American Highway and an efficient system of air travel, the geographical and climatic regions of Chile are still distinctly different realms – from the Altiplano in the northern Andes to rich agricultural land around Santiago, temperate rain forests in the lake district and barren windswept islands close to Antarctica.

Chile is separated from Argentina to the east by the formidable wall of the Andes, and from Peru and Bolivia to the north by the inhospitable Atacama Desert. Only a few islands dot the vast Pacific Ocean between Chile and New Zealand, its nearest neighbour to the west.

This has created a distinct physical and psychological context for architecture. The indigenous peoples of Chile, unlike the Incas and Mayas to the north, were warriors rather than builders. Under Spanish colonial rule, Chile was administered as a poor outpost of their Peruvian colony. And because of the country's location along a major geological fault line, such historic building stock that did exist has been largely destroyed over the centuries by frequent earthquakes.

In recent years, Chile's economic and political fortunes have been mixed. When the socialist government of Salvador Allende was toppled by a military coup in 1973, power was assumed by General Agosto Pinochet. Although Pinochet rescued an economy in chaos by imposing strict principles of free-market capitalism, his regime was harsh and repressive. When the government fell in 1988, Chile emerged as a democracy savouring its new freedoms.

Geography, a lack of architectural nostalgia for the past, cultural and economic ties to Europe and North America, and this particular moment in its political evolution have contributed to the 'flowering' of a lively debate that, more than in any other Latin American country, can be seen in a diverse range of outstanding contemporary Chilean architecture.

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All life in the Atacama is gathered around water. Like other settlements, the hotel at San Pedro is an oasis. Starting with architecture and the plaza, we make a connection with the landscape with a line of still water. Instead of one large swimming pool, which would be quite foreign to the place, we made four pools.

The custom in Chile is to saddle up and to keep the horses tethered while they are waiting to be ridden. In the desert, the waiting horse must have shade and water. A wooden shading structure wraps the inner edge of the stable plaza, complemented by a long trough of still water.

Hotel San Pedro de Atacama, 1999

Opposite, top:
Swimming pools and saunas in the Atacama. The swimming pools have been planned close to the hotel but on a sequence of pools each marked by a shade structure and sauna.

Opposite, bottom:
Horse stables in the Atacama, 2000.

buildings that go back to the beginning, using materials in a primitive way to make a modern place. This is the same thing that Richard Long does with his sculpture. In his hands, a circle of stones becomes something sophisticated. Like Richard Long, we try to do much with minimal means. The relationship between one person and another is not based on physical similarities. Man and wife do not look alike, but rather share love. A hotel in the Atacama does not have to look like the old buildings in the desert but instead must follow the spirit of the place.

The hotel draws upon the simple ways of life in the desert. People who live in the Atacama have the most beautiful textiles in the world yet they live in simple mud houses. All of the houses, like horses at the racecourse, are marked with coloured wood. While the houses are quite rough, the textiles, clothes and furniture – the things people touch – are very sophisticated. In thinking about a hotel in this context, it is critical to understand that not everything is important. Without mockery, we built the Explora Hotel at San Pedro de Atacama without worrying too much about the quality of workmanship – that is, the wood and concrete are not precise.

I lived one week per month in both Patagonia and the Atacama before building there. Each project took five years. In the Atacama I went to talk to the owner of the land near San Pedro on which we wanted to site the hotel. I asked for a tape measure and he replied: 'The tape measure is very imprecise'. In his mind, the land is a '*cuerpo cierto*', a body determined not by dimensions but by its character. Part of the Explora concept is that the surrounding natural and cultural environment has to be preserved. In Patagonia, the mountains and lakes are near to the hotel. In the Atacama, they are distant. To emphasise this, the hotel there is built around an empty plaza. Our model was the Mayan city. In the middle of nowhere, instead of building streets first, the Mayans built a flat platform to contrast with the imprecise land. They then placed buildings on it, related not by streets but by their presence on the platform. Using this model at San Pedro, the main building forms the heart of the plaza and the bedrooms define the edge against the vastness of the desert.

As architects we have artistic rather than scientific certitudes. I have an idea that all lines in the Atacama are made by walls of mud or river stone, which are more like hedgerows than straight lines of barbed wire or wood fences. This produces a setting with a different kind of precision – a beautiful imprecision. The ideas, the certitudes, are not imposed from outside but grow out of the land. We bought several properties, and mindful of the character of the land kept the mud walls that had been built around the edges of each field. In contrast with the colonial way of building cities, the forms of the hotel arise from the centuries-old boundaries of the fields.

We wanted to build our own horizon. When standing or sitting in the main building, the bedroom roofs are at eye level. Everything below this new horizon is the hotel, and everything above is the Atacama.

The hotel at San Pedro is a public building that is different from, say, a group of houses. The main building is on a three-metre-high platform while the surrounding bedrooms are raised just one-and-a-half metres above the ground. Because the bedrooms are slightly elevated, people can tend the crops and livestock in the fields without disrupting the privacy of the hotel guests in their rooms. We wanted to build our own horizon. When standing or sitting in the main building, the bedroom roofs are at eye level. Everything below this new horizon is the hotel, and everything above is the Atacama. The bedrooms define the edge of the place of the hotel and the vastness of the desert beyond. The curved metal roofs create both a boundary in the foreground and a distant horizon. It is the same principle as at Chichen Itza, where the main buildings are elevated so that you can see over the jungle and understand your place in the world. This Mayan idea is very different from the medieval lord making a walled compound. The Mayan concept is not one of defending a last stronghold, but of keeping an eye on what is below and beyond.

The hotel has two roofs that reflect two different systems and geometries. Above the flat roofs of the buildings is a second lighter roof that creates covered walkways, shades the buildings and tempers the hot, dry climate of the desert. Locally these shading structures are typically made from several layers of branches. At the hotel they are framed by dimension lumber and clad with copper. The sun in the desert is penetrating and one is always searching for shade. Shade there is not dark, but is punctuated by light

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penetrating through the layers of branches. We did not want to use branches because that would have been too folkloric. We did not copy traditional forms of construction but alluded to them in another way. We revealed the layers of our construction, peeling back the copper cladding at the edges of the shading structures to expose the wood framing. Light penetrates through this 'fringe' along the edge, creating changing patterns of light and shadow as the sun and moon move through their diurnal, monthly and seasonal cycles. As you walk under this roof, instead of a dark penumbra the changing patterns of light invite you to move ahead.

This idea of working with moving light is also drawn from the vibration of intense daylight in the desert. In the same way, and thinking about the character of the place, I fought against having bright light in the hotel at night. The Atacama may well be one of the few places on earth without electric light at night. In the desert, there is only the star-filled night sky.

I could not be British, because the landscape there is too perfect. I am South American and I understand the landscape in the indigenous way. The landscape is endless. In order for wilderness to be wild, it has to be seen in contrast with ground that has some architectural marks. The hotel has no garden, but it does have a landscape. All of the fields around the hotel are irrigated – not sprinkled but flooded so that the pressure of deep water reaches deep roots. All towns in the Atacama have 'charcas', or large pools. In some places they are in the middle of town and in others they are small lagoons around the town. There is still no running water in the desert.

All life in the Atacama is gathered around water. Like other settlements, the hotel at San Pedro is an oasis. Starting with architecture and the plaza, we make a connection with the landscape with a line of still water. Instead of one large swimming pool, which would be quite foreign to the place, we made four pools so that they could use just one at a time for irrigation. In these pools, water overflows the edges and is still. It reflects the surroundings. The pools are located at the edges of fields where trees are more abundant. The broken line of water reflects the sky, the green of the trees and the small white pavilions adjacent to the pools. Without imitating nature, we have created an abstraction of the mountains and clouds reflected in the water of the desert.

Farm buildings are beautiful because they are modest, presenting themselves simply as what they are and not pretending to be something else. We wanted the stables and the garage of the hotel to have a similar character, and we wanted people to see them. The stables and parking are bounded by walls of a single material, white-painted concrete. They are planned to form a second irregularly shaped place which forms the entrance forecourt to the hotel. In the stables, coloured, dappled light is admitted through holes in the concrete roof that are infilled with bottle glass. One hole in each stall remains open, allowing rainwater to drain where the horse does not stand. These small patches of light enliven the stables and help with cleanliness.

At Puritama, the footpath was designed from traces of human use of the site over centuries, not by zigzags drawn in the office

Because the hotel is conceived as a town, we have created deliberate ambiguity between inside and outside. Monumentally scaled doors open the foyers to the out of doors. Horses can be ridden through the main building at ground level, so guests in the public rooms above may hear the sound of the horses' hoofs on the stone pavement. There are likewise multiple paths through this 'town'. Guests can go to the dining room through the foyers, through an open-air alley at the heart of the main building or from terraces. The living room of the hotel is designed as a large empty space, the equivalent of the empty square outside, to allow for distance between people.

At the hot springs at Puritama, located in a rugged and secluded valley 15 kilometres northeast of San Pedro, the strategy is quite different. Our intervention there is more modest. We have created a raised path for visitors to walk along the river without touching the ground. The meandering path does not impose a direction but invites movement. At Puritama, the footpath was designed from traces of human use of the site over centuries, not by zigzags drawn in the office. We retained two very old Inca stone houses and built two new white-painted concrete pavilions to house changing rooms. And we have 'built' shade in the desert, shade makes a place even when there is nothing else. The shade structure is located where, over the years, people had camped, built fires and scarred the ground.

I do not think about Explora in the Atacama as a narrative, but as an experience of the landscape, the weather and the people without a narrative. I want

The hot springs at Puritama, 2000.

people to have the experience without being conscious of how it has been accomplished. For example, when it occasionally rains, water running off the copper roof leaves green stains on the concrete. I want to let these things happen in an open way instead of controlling the outcome like Disneyland. Most hotels want to 'soften' the entrance experience. I think that is boring. In Barcelona many restaurants are entered through the kitchens, so that you see fully the life of the place.

I do not think about Explora in the Atacama as a narrative, but as an experience of the landscape, the weather and the people without a narrative.

I intentionally made the entrance to the hotel through the stables, which are normally tucked away out of sight. I have been criticised for making the entrance stair up to the platform very steep. I did this so that you have to concentrate on ascending the stair and so that when you arrive at the top it is a surprise.

In my experience, architectural schools often promote a calculated way of thinking that strives for perfection. I do not believe in perfection. Instead, I believe in being open to what is going to happen. A mistake is often beautiful. Just as a good linen shirt is always wrinkled, so the workers in the Atacama cannot build the perfect wall. Walls gather dust and develop cracks over time. More important than perfection is the idea that beauty appears through ageing. We work with, rather than against, that idea. Form has to follow life. Architecture must follow, instead of imposing or leading, it must make life possible.

From conversations of German del Sol with Annette LeCuyer and Brian Carter, March 2002.