ORGANIC ARCHITECTURE: REFLECTIONS ON A CONVERSATION WITH ARCHITECT *JAVIER SENOSIAIN*

by Rebecca Velasquez

As architects, we are taught to think outside the box, but we never question who boxed our way of thinking in the first place. We are born and instantly put into incubators, taken home, then put in cribs; we begin to crawl through rectangular doorways into squared rooms throughout the house. Kids are given iPads or phones—square screens. Rooms inside our homes are squared; bathroom tiles are squared; room storage has rectangular drawers; our beds are squared. As life progresses, we are confined into additional boxes until eventually we are placed into a square coffin. Our environment is square, so we look at everything with squared eyes. On September 22nd, Mexican architect Javier Senosiain began his experimental lecture—which included interludes by saxophonist Howard Wiley—by pointing out that the world of architecture constantly boxes us into thinking about design. Through cornered shapes such as rectangles, squares, and the cube: humans defy nature and build squares.

Javier Senosiain is famous for being one of the first architects to design organic architecture in Mexico. He receives inspiration from nature's curved lines, where he sees how naturally organic forms are created without any straight lines. Trees, roots, branches, and leaves are all curved. As humans, we are used to living within cornered spaces. Yet, Senosian argues we should study our past, look at how our ancestors survived, and go back to our grassroots. People have distanced themselves from their ancestors, becoming accustomed to new trends such as modern architecture, which centers around function and uses sharp, straight lines. We are used to machines and technologies that seem to satisfy our everyday needs. Yet, the earth is all that we need to survive.
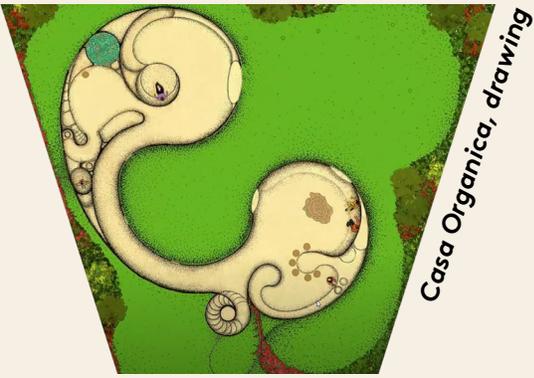
Casa Organica, drawing

Senosiain's Casa Organica, located in Mexico, is a private house sitting on a hill that overlooks the city. The English translation of Casa Organica is "Organic Home." This shark-shaped home is designed to grow out of the ground. The name derives from the structure's natural cave-like materials. The natural lighting penetrates the interior, the south-facing windows allow heat in the winter, though it offers little resistance to wind. The home is rooted into the earth, surrounded by nature, which produces oxygen, discarding pollution, and filtering dust and carbon dioxide to create its own microclimate. According to Senosiain, the act of using the natural environment originates from animal dwellings, as animals know how to survive, and do it well. For example, female animals stay home while the male searches for food. Therefore, the home should be designed around the female body as she spends the most time using it. Casa Organica is an excellent example of spaces that are molded from the user's environment, physical and psychological needs.
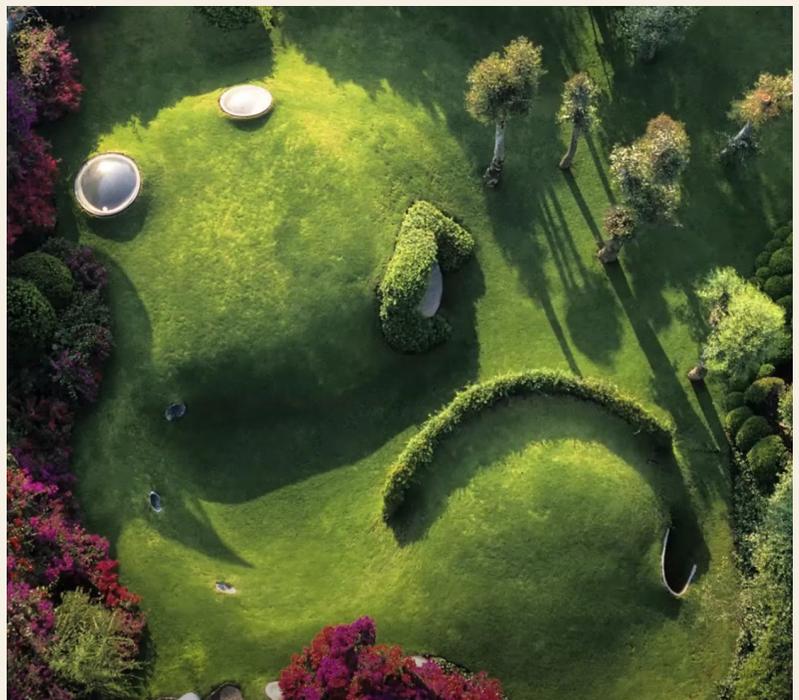
Casa Organica

Being a student in architecture school can be quite challenging and stressful, yet we can see in Senosiain's work how much he enjoys the design process. He says, "Cuando comienzas en processo creativo, gozenlo," which means, enjoy beginning the creative process. Clearly, his work shows that he enjoys connecting with his roots. His designs show how Mexico is an integral part of who he is while respecting his ancestors' way of thinking. He looks at how people first adopted natural forms such as caverns and igloos and managed to survive without drastically modifying the environment. Senosiain also explains how the animal shapes that his design creates are secondary to his design process; he focuses on the use of space first. Through his organic homes rooted in history, he clearly respects his ancestors, his roots, and puts ancestral ideas into practice.

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The Nautilus, drawing

The Nautilus is a home located northwest of Mexico City that takes the form of a volumetric spiral, with an array of glass-stained walls creating different effects through light and color within the home. Once again, the design doesn't involve any straight lines. This snail-like structure provides resistance to wind and creates a natural shelter for the users. The spaces created a home to vegetation, and instead of having nature added to the home, residents are the ones entering and invading the space. Having this home embedded into the ground allows the residents to stay cool in the summer months. The thick walls and the heavy geometric shapes of the home make it seem like a hot place to live, yet Senosiain designed the houses in a way that keeps organic forms and ways to reside in front of mind.

The Nautilus, interior

Organic architecture has an opportunity to grow from residential homes to bigger forms of infra-structure. Senosiain slowly began to think about the individual, then the family, the neighborhood, the town, and the cities. El Nido de Quetzalcóatl, located in Mexico, is a project where we see the effect of organic architecture in a public realm. It is a breathtaking park, with its use of animal forms providing care for its own environment to the snake form that crosses through the park. "Nido" means nest, and "Quetzalcóatl" is known to be a god who takes the form of a serpent with bird feathers. Senosiain designed a nest of snakes throughout the park, using them as entrances, water access, walls, and places of rest.

El Nido de Quetzalcóatl

Senosiain believes in creating what you are passionate about and fighting for what you believe. He goes beyond designing homes, parks, and small eco spaces for the community. His philosophy is that humans are meant to be integrated into nature rather than moving further away from it. In moving closer, we can help the earth help us. He dreams of a Ciudad Verde—Green City in English—which is a city that wouldn't use internal combustion. This idea slowly grows from the ecobarrio (eco neighborhood) to the eco pueblo (eco town) to ecociudad (eco city) and eventually to Megalopolis.

Megalopolis, the Green City

It seems it would be easier to integrate organic forms into architecture as humans relate more to organic architecture and the materials used from the earth. Yet, it is what architecture students struggle to understand most. It is interesting to see how people, in general, have been stuck within a box that forces us to think about spaces that corner a resident. I asked Javier how he knows that organic architecture works for the users compared to the rectangular home. He explained that it is challenging to understand the rectangular shape instead of the organic shape since no straight lines exist in nature. Our human nature is the same: we don't walk in a straight line. Instead, we bend and move in curves. Additionally from a financial perspective, construction costs are less when corners are cut, as the curve has better resistance.

Modern architecture has fogged our way of thinking, making us ignore the past and look into futuristic forms. This way of thinking can be combined with what our ancestors have put into practice, as well as balancing what didn't work in the past and what is currently functioning for the user. We all have a family tree and roots where we came from, and architects need to remember the past. When we learn from history, we can use what we already have to create a better environment for us and the earth.

Rebecca Velasquez is a second-year M.Arch student at CCA. She graduated from California State University Sacramento with BFA in Interior Architecture and a minor in music. After attending this lecture, she is definitely a fan of organic architecture and Javier Senoisan.

You can watch the full lecture here, in the CCA@CCA archive.
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