

In Mexico City, a growing forum for Latin American architecture

Huge, diverse, and rapidly urbanizing, Latin America is arguably one of the world's most dynamic regions in terms of design and urbanism. A number of spatial and social innovations developed there have been adopted around the globe — *ciclovía*, bus rapid transit, and participatory budgeting, to name a few. Until recently, however, architects working there had few opportunities to meet one another and exchange ideas. One organization that has started to change this is Mexico City's LIGA-DF, whose small storefront hosts exhibitions from designers throughout Latin America.

I asked Wonne Ickx, one of its founders, for his perspective on the state of architecture and architectural communication in Mexico and beyond.

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What is LIGA and why did you start it?

LIGA is actually an initiative of our architectural studio, PRODUCTORA, and a curator, Ruth Estevez. We felt that there was a need for a space of debate and discussion. In Mexico and Latin America, a lot of young architects have the opportunity to start building at quite a young age, like coming out of our master's. There's such a time pressure to deliver your work, that there is hardly any time to reflect on your work, to think what you really stand for, to consider what architecture should be really about. That is forgotten — especially in contrast to, for example, the US, where it's completely opposite. In the United States there are many more discussion platforms and exhibition spaces where young architects can experiment to identify themselves and shape their practice without physically building. Of course, everything has an advantage and a disadvantage. But especially in Latin America we found it was necessary to invite these young architects to show their work in a context that normally they're not confronted with, and to demand them to speak about their work and reflect upon it.



LIGA exhibition

When we started the initiative, we decided to focus on Latin America. We're actually not really interested in creating a regional identity — I think these are discourses from bygone times — but on the other hand, we also didn't want to make a world platform, because of our limited resources. If we wanted to make this space something really particular and embedded into its local context, it would not be interesting to invite, let's say, Christian Kerez, Studio Mumbai, or Go Hasegawa to exhibit their work. They already have good platforms to showcase their work all over the globe. We would just have a third-world version of exhibitions that already take place in London or Paris. So instead we said, let's focus on Latin America to bring out into the open some really interesting work that is being produced in the region.



Interior of the gallery space

And then when we invited these young architects, we got confronted with a very interesting problem. The space that we rent is a small space below our office. It's just on the border on the Roma and Condesa neighborhoods in Mexico City — two neighborhoods with a lot of social activity — but it's a very, very small space, only 160ft², and basically a sort of weird left-over triangle. There's not one single white wall where you can hang a picture. So what we thought in the beginning could be problematic became an interesting character of the space. No one could really pin some architectural plans, sections, renderings or photography against the wall and put a nice model in front of it. The possibility of a classical architectural exhibition was already excluded by the spatial characteristics of the gallery itself. Everyone was confronted with this space and had to react to it one way or another.

So the opening exhibition for example, from a Chilean duo, Pezo von Ellrichshausen, was very smart. They made a scale model of a museum which they presented as sort of dollhouse at a miniature scale. They developed different rooms in it. The interesting thing was when we then sent these images out to the press and told them we were opening a new space for contemporary architecture in Mexico City they thought we had a huge space with nice wooden floors and high ceilings because they saw the interior views of the model, which was pretty realistically done.

So that's the way we started, in 2011. We've now invited architects from more than 10 different countries to the space.



Model by Pezo von Ellrichshausen

I'm surprised to hear that many architects get commissions directly out of school. Why do you think this is the case?

Being very realistic, the socioeconomic inequality in Latin America is so big, the percentage of people that can go to university is so low. Basically people that graduate as architects, they're already from higher middle or upper class. People in Mexico say there are so many architects graduating. It's true, but on the other hand it's a small amount of the population. It's completely different in US or Europe; these numbers are completely different. And that's the reason why I think there's a lot of opportunity for young architects to start doing stuff.

And do most graduates stay in their own countries, from what you've seen, or are there regional firms or dominant countries that architects gravitate toward? Do architecture commissions tend to be localized?

Yes, I think so. I think everybody works a bit in his own local environment. One of the reasons why we started LIGA was that when we met our Latin American colleagues, we would meet them in New York or Houston or Los Angeles when somebody would organize a congress on Latin American architecture. Pratt did a series in New York; Harvard's GSD had a sort of Latin series as well; the University of Austin did a lot of good work, and also the BAL in Pamplona... But we thought it was really problematic, that we were always brought together from a foreign perspective.

Since LIGA opened, we've seen several spaces pop up in Latin America that are all of sudden interested in organizing a congress. There's a very interesting one on Latin American architecture in Lima every two years. The Biennale in Quito becomes more and more important every year. And I think it's really important that this is also a reflection from the inside, and not always through a foreign lens.

We're trying to find a way we can also talk about architecture as a discipline, and it's not always related to these larger socioeconomic themes

Do you see very different things being emphasized when the perspective shifts from external to internal?

One of the reasons why we think LIGA is relevant is that of course when you approach Latin America from the outside there are a lot of socioeconomic factors that are so in your face. It's very normal, I don't think it's problematic — immediately people feel triggered to address only the sociopolitical themes: the favelas, the informal settlements, the lack of water, electricity, and sewer systems in poor areas, or the violence, gated communities, etc. The focus is then often on sensational themes like the drug lord aesthetic of the very wealthy or the urban problems of the have-nots: both themes that appeal very much to a foreign public for very different reasons.

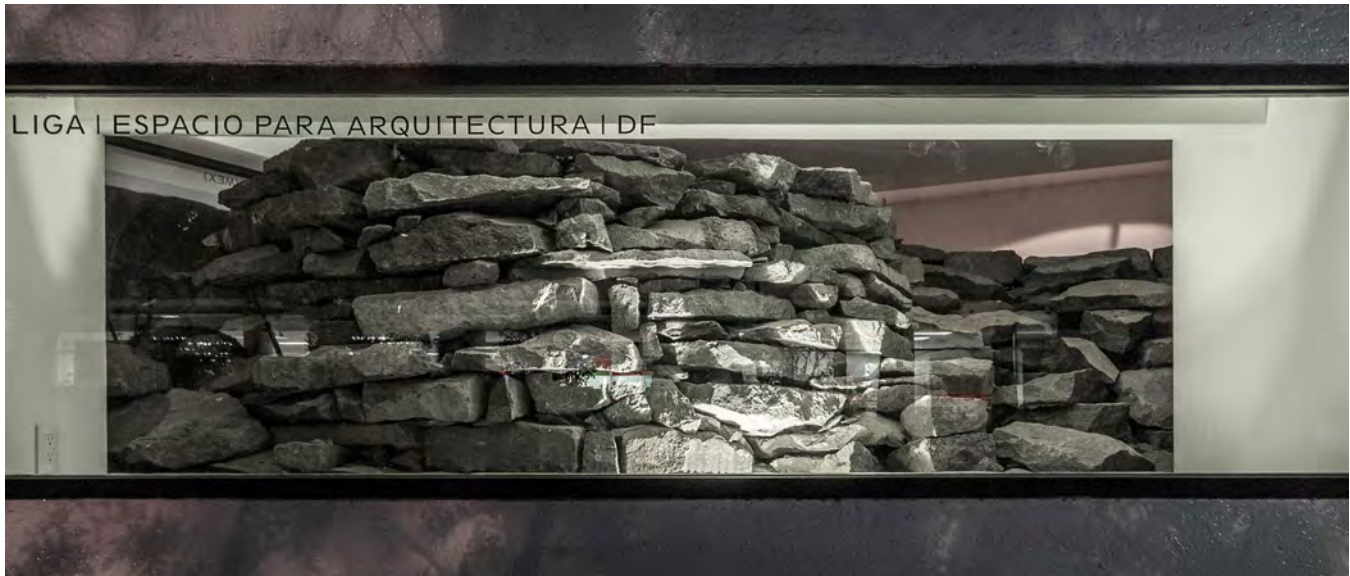
But there's more to the production of architecture in Latin America. We're trying to find a way we can also talk about architecture as a discipline, and it's not always related to these larger socioeconomic themes, although we're always continuously and unavoidably embedded in them.



Exhibit by Estudio Macias Peredo

You see it in the people that have been invited. People touch on very different themes in their work, and a lot of them in a very indirect way have socioeconomic factors involved. One exhibition by Estudio Macias Peredo from Guadalajara, it's a very heavy piece, more than 30 tons of stones placed into the gallery, but of course it has everything to do with manual labor. This is the kind of exhibition which is so simple and so brutal and so primitive, it's almost impossible to think of in New York or something because of the cost of the manual labor.

So a lot of times these relations are implicit in the exhibition. It's part of our daily way of working that is presented in a different way in the exhibition.



So you feel when there are exhibitions, talks, or articles about Latin American architecture produced outside of the region there's an excessive focus on socioeconomic factors.

Yes. For example, three years ago they gave the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale to Urban-Think Tank. And again, the project dealt with a very harsh social condition; it was this big tower, Torre David in Venezuela. I understand that they got the Golden Lion because it was such an extraordinary phenomenon — this multibillion investment in a huge tower that was overtaken by the lower-class inhabitants of the city. But in the end it's always the same dramatic perspective of Latin America that's shown to the outside. It's a bit like Rem Koolhaas doing studies on Lagos. There are probably also very interesting architects producing work in Nigeria, but it's hard to hear their voices because they have no platforms to show their work. It's always about this city as chaos. And if you study a bit about Mexico City, it's also true that this is the same kind of lens that has always been used.

How can you make something beautiful and interesting in this harsh context, without making this context the central theme in your work and without denying it?

So, what do you do as a young architect when you get your first commissions, let's say a small house? How can you talk about your work in an interesting way, without having to recur to that same perspective? How can you make something beautiful and interesting in this harsh context, without making this context the central theme in your work and without denying it?

It's interesting particularly because, in my personal opinion at least, socioeconomic issues are under-discussed in the North American context. Obviously that's changing to some degree.

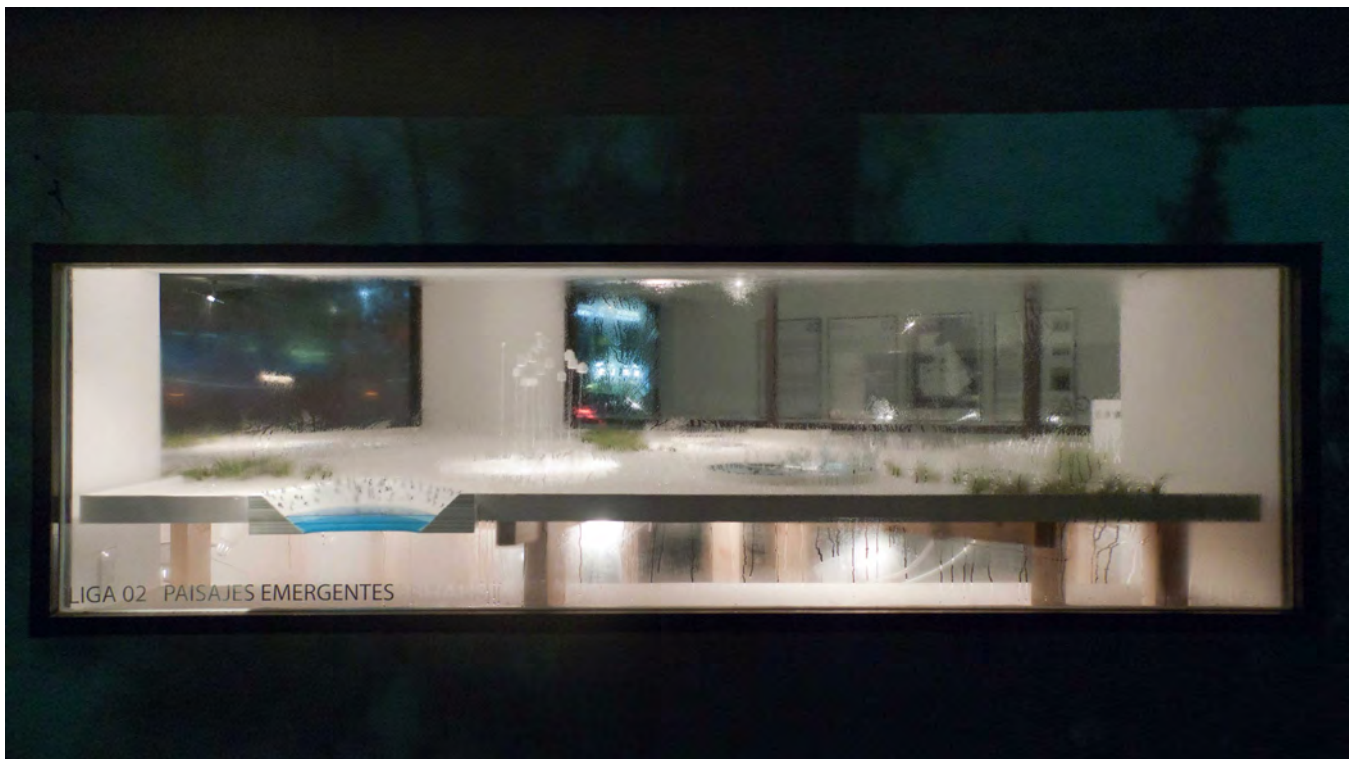
Exactly, I completely agree. They prefer to talk about these difficult issues when they look to somebody else, but if you talk about your own situation it's much more difficult.

Maybe, to be honest, maybe the same thing happens in Mexico City, the same thing happens in Latin America. Maybe we find it too complex to make that our central theme when we talk about our own way of operating. If you go really deep into it, there's no way out of it anymore.

Can you tell me about an exhibit that you feel really achieved the goals of the space, not only in terms of producing an exhibition but in helping the architect develop and raising the level of dialogue about architecture in the region?

The inaugural exhibition done by the Chilean couple Pezo von Ellrichshausen was incredibly smart. Architecture exhibitions always have to choose some way between “being” architecture or “representing” architecture. I’m generalizing a little bit, but they always have to deal with the fact of becoming architecture itself: doing something on a scale of one to one, or by making the exhibition layout so “architectural” that it becomes a piece on itself. The other option is representing architecture through drawing, models, photography, etc. I think that in their exhibition this duality between being architecture and representing architecture was played out very intelligently. They made this mini museum — a piece of architecture — but at the same time all the rooms in this space housed the representations of their own work. Very clever!

I want to talk also about the second exhibition, by a studio called Paisajes Emergentes from Colombia. They’ve since split up and are called LCLA, Luis Callejas Landscape Architects, and LAP, Laboratorio de Arquitectura y Paisaje. Basically they filled up the whole exhibition space with a large table in which they used these little balls called hydrogel. It’s something from the agricultural industry — small particles that can absorb up to 200 times their own weight in water. So basically the whole exhibition was about water. And then there’s light underneath the table, to create a sort of mysterious glow passing through the models.



But since it’s a closed space, the whole room became very humid and damp and the gallery created its own microclimate — a sort of greenhouse with steamy windows. And that was really interesting. Paisaje Emergentes was really interested in talking about these things that you cannot represent in architectural drawings or AutoCAD or Revit. Humidity, heat, cold, vapor, steam; all these things which no one knows how to draw in architectural programs. You can imagine, in three months of this exhibition the whole thing became moldy, there were

mosquitoes, and we even had mushrooms growing on the models. But that's another point: we're a very small space, so things can be a bit more experimental.

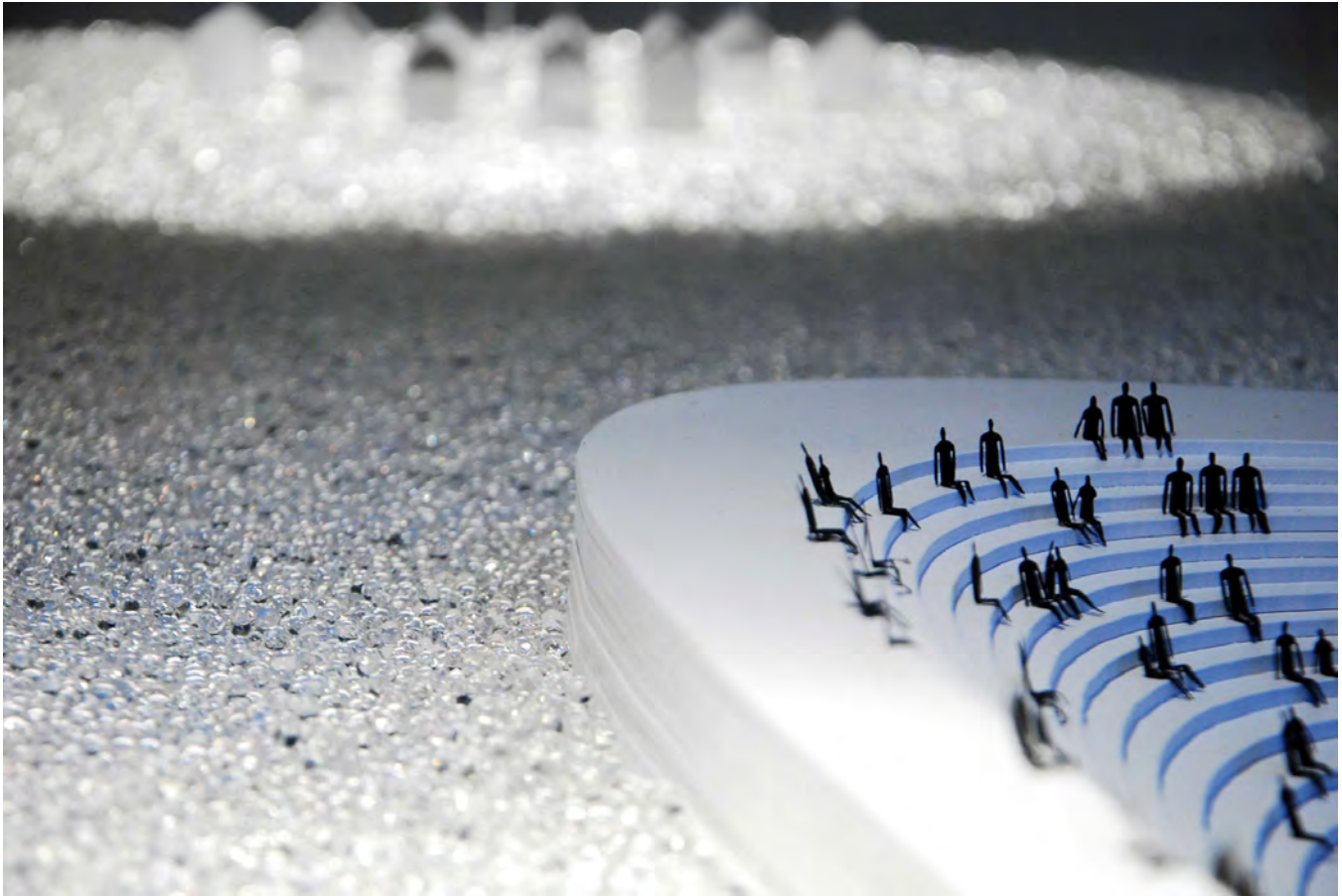


Exhibit by Paisajes Emergentes

Izaskun Chinchilla, she made the whole exhibition out of three edible cakes.

Then a very beautiful piece was by Eduardo Castillo from Chile. His father was a carpenter, he's trained as a carpenter as well. He basically built this huge monolith of wood in a workshop of a carpenter. They brought it as one piece to the architectural gallery, and he fixed the volume between the floor and ceiling of the gallery space, so it kind of stayed there in all its massivity, pressed between the ceiling and the floor. I thought it was a very poetic, beautiful piece. It's certainly one of my favorites.



Exhibit by Eduardo Castillo

Where do you see LIGA going from here?

It's a very good question. Of course when you start such a space you're always eager to get more and more exposure and more and more relevance. We had several experiences, for example the Triennale in Lisbon. For a moment we were working with the Architecture Foundation in London, but that didn't work out. But we have a feeling we should give ourselves time to keep on doing what we're doing... for a while more. It's a very difficult thing to export. It's a very particular space with a very particular agenda in a very specific context.

So you're kind of figuring out as you go, then?

We've had a very good response to the space, both in Latin America and beyond. For example, we just invited an office from Peru and another from Brazil to present their work, and they all knew the space and hoped to do an exhibition there. So I have a feeling it's becoming like when they invite you to the Emerging Voices at the Architectural League in New York. It's stuff in your career that has certain relevance, and I think that's already something fantastic.

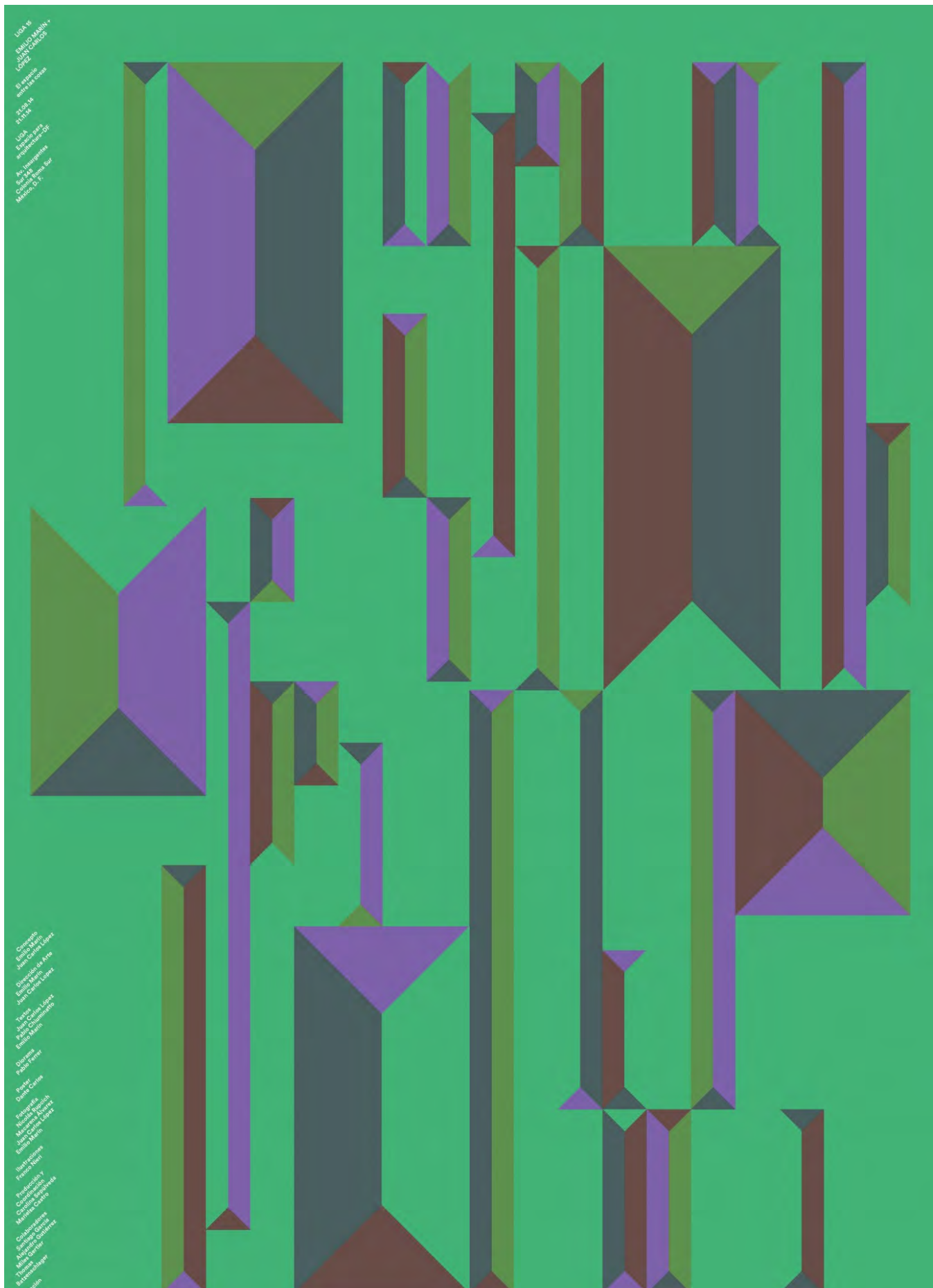


Exhibit poster

We also ask all the invited architects to create a poster and to provide us with a new text on their work. Until now they have always asked other people to write the text on them, so it became a sort of tradition and an important way to establish new connections. All of a sudden this Argentinian architect asks some friend in LA or New York or Peru to write about them, and I think that's very important, that our space can help to establish new links between people.

There are texts by Mark Lee and Gerardo Caballero about a very beautiful exhibition by Diego Arrigada from Argentina. Basically he connected two windows of the space with a metal tube, so it becomes very strange tunnel — every time you want to look into the gallery to see what's going on, your view is directed outside again towards the street. And that for me is what you see when you look at Latin American architecture: you see basically the street again — the taco seller, the people living on the streets. It's a very strong piece: it allows a lot of interpretation. It talks about abstract architectural topics such as inside–outside, structure, span, and materiality, but at the same time looks back again at the immediate urban context in all its raw reality.



The piece is called “Looking In, Looking Out.” That’s very powerful; maybe it’s in a certain way even what we try to do with our space. It’s a good metaphor for the LIGA project.

Interview condensed and edited.