

ZEST ARCHITECTURE

Poetry is what really lets us dwell — Heidegger

Paraphrasing Heidegger we could say that building, which is the root meaning of dwelling, is our way of being on this earth. We find a spot, our slice of space, and we give it significance by adding our dwelling place, be it a house, office or other building.

We'd better go about this carefully, as each time we create a building in a specific location (which only derives its existence as such through our action), it is our only chance. For ZEST, the poetry which turns a building from an empty container into a dwelling-place, is derived from its relationship with its site and context, its spatial layout and functionality, the play of daylight, but also to an enormous extent from the materials we build with. We choose them for what the Japanese call their "wabi sabi". Wabi refers to any irregularities and imperfections in the material itself, sabi to how it ages and bears testimony to the passing of time, showing traces of human touch, of raindrops, of heat and cold.

And as we humans seem to be running out of time on this earth, squandering resources and lessening prospects for future generations, at ZEST we choose to incorporate sustainability into all of our decisions. This means designing buildings that need less high technology to be comfortable, choosing the right materials and learning from traditions and craftsmen.

Villa CP, our project at this Venice Biennale, is the house of ZEST principal Co Govers and as such was a laboratory for ZEST design. It allowed us to implement low-tech sustainable features we had yet to see in action in one of our projects, such as the natural pool, the reed bed, and the water purification system, and work with materials such as cork and clay.

The project is the restoration of an old stone ruin set in 25 hectares of oak forest, in a natural park near Girona, Spain. Because the building envelope had to be rebuilt more or less in its original form, we developed a concept of two story lines, whereby the original building serves as a background against which we offset our interventions in steel, wood and glass. In order not to erase the memory of its "state as ruin", boxes in Corten steel mark all the openings, accentuating the thickness of the wall and its unevenness. Large windows on all sides allow uninterrupted views over the horizon, bringing the landscape inside. Large shutters of Corten steel provide shade on the south side and show the traces of raindrops on their surface when closed. An outside shower has doors perforated with blown up raindrop shapes, which throw a cascade of "sunshine drops" on the wall as the sun moves over the house. Walls are insulated with cork panels and finished with clay, a cloudy, slightly imperfect surface that grows more beautiful with time.

To strengthen the relationship between house and site, we surrounded the house with a water wise garden with Mediterranean species and a natural pool, where plants and reeds purify the water. This has become a wildlife sanctuary where frogs sun themselves on water lilies, salamanders hide between the reeds and birds wash on the infinity edge.

We felt it impossible to tell the story of Villa CP with words and pictures only, so we brought the "anteroom" of its sauna to the Venice Biennale, which serves as a frame for the photos and shows the craftsmanship of 72-year-old maestro Señor Turò.

Time stands still here. There is infinite space.
This is what it means to exist.

