

DISPLAY

Exposed Pràxis.
The Studio and Other
Crypto-Exhibitions
of Architectural Poetics
and Intentions

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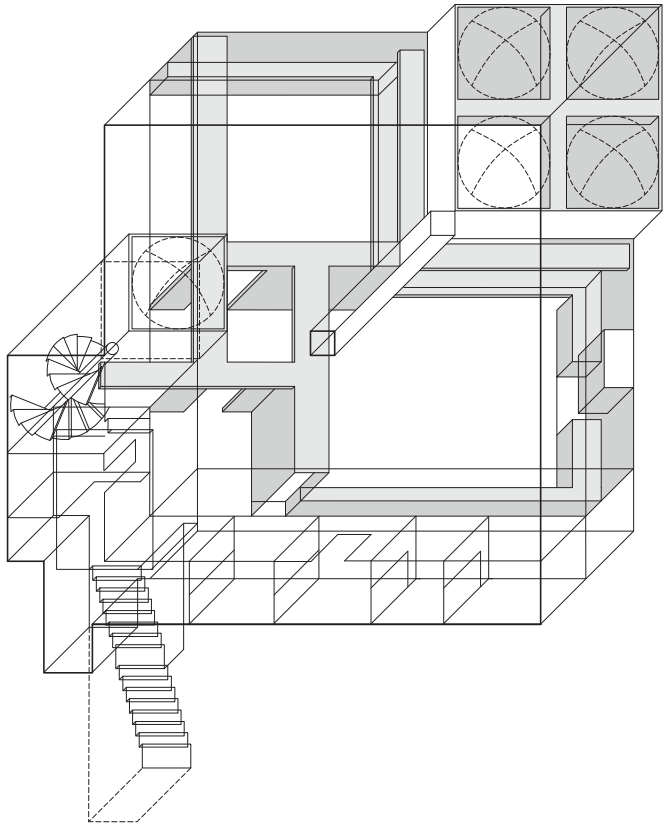
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Between a Quadreria and a Man's Cave. On Fernando Higuera's Rascainfiernos

BY

Jacopo Leveratto
Alessandra Bruno

Fundación Fernando Higuera, Madrid;
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The idea came in the early 1970s, with the improbable event of the Death tarot card appearing four times in a row and on four different occasions. Which, according to the card reader, Francisco Nieva, was not necessarily a sign that the querent, Fernando Higuera, was going to die soon. But which nonetheless had to imply that, in three years, in one way or another, he, Fernando, would have inevitably been underground with a cypress on top of him. An outlook that, no matter how irrational it might sound, began to make the Madrilenian architect, willingly or not, understandably concerned about his safety. To the point that immediately after the reading he decided to devise a way to save his life by simultaneously complying with his fate, to be put it into practice by means of design, as he was used to, as soon as the right opportunity had arisen¹.

Fortunately, almost as predicted, this opportunity did not take long to come, even though probably not in the most pleasant way. Early in 1972, in fact, just after having bought a nice small house for his family, at 36 Maestro Lasalle Street, in Madrid, Higuera was struggling with a turbulently collapsing marriage. And despite having two different professional studios, he was still in need of a proper space to work. Hence, after yet another argument with his wife, who wanted him definitely out of home, he decided to occupy the patio, just out of spite, to build his new home-office. And since the house was listed by the current urban planning, which prevented it from any addition or expansion, he was left with no choice but to think of a downward extension of the space. Which he, recalling Nieva's prediction, imagined as the underground negative of the other construction.

The problem, however, was that the patio was so small and the passages so narrow that no construction machinery could be brought there. But he was so determined not to leave the house, and moreso

1. The story of the idea, as reported by Lola Botia, personal and professional partner of the architect until his death, can be found in F. F. Muñoz Carabias and F. J. Moreno Cañete, *Higuera y su rasca infernos: Otro lenguaje, otra estética, otra ecología y arquitectura*, in "Revista de Arquitecturas Modernas", n. 1, 2024, pp. 208-227. For further references, see the bibliography presented here.

to annoy his wife, to do everything with shovel and wheelbarrow. Arriving, in three years, to have a nine-metre cube dug in the garden, which he first consolidated with a brick wall as a lost formwork. And which he then covered with a reinforced concrete layer equipped with direct drainage and a ventilation chamber. Divided in plan into four identical smaller squares by a central pillar, and into two storeys in section. With a bedroom, a toilet, and a living room with a kitchen on the open mezzanine, occupying three of the four squares directly linked to the garden. And a large open-space studio taking the whole surface of the lower floor, generously lit up by a skylight covering the double-height square.

A cave, in other words, as he often referred to it. Or better, a hellscaper, or a *rascainfernos*, as he immediately called it, just out of superstition, after having had the idea. A personal shelter built around himself, characterised by a constant temperature, whether it was winter or summer, and a diffused and smooth zenithal light in almost every hour of the day. And in which any sound from outside would come muffled and the only relationship with the world was that with the sky. At the same time inspired by the excavated villages of Maghreb and realised in adherence to the strict geometrical rules derived from the most rational of the organisational and structural schemes. Both organic in its conception, representing a timeless, minimal, and expandable spatial module, and rigorous in its construction, dictated by a classical composition full of symmetries and axialities. But with no rigidity at all, at least in terms of use.

This was because the space had to be a continuous and flowing one where the ideas of working and living could come to terms with no friction, as part of a way of dwelling that knew no formalities in this sense. Thus, apart from the bedroom, no room was closed, but they were all designed in direct communication with the others to blur the boundaries of the two functions. With what could be considered the living room, for instance, always invaded by a bunch of papers and models, often used to discuss with clients and colleagues. With the studio, presided by a large hammock stretched just under the skylight and the vegetation cascading from the skylight, usually meant for relaxation. And with this blur further testified by a

horizontal line running throughout the whole space, set a little over two metres in height, representing the main equipping element of the house, be it a cornice, a bookshelf, or a hanging device.

The design of the interior space, in other words, was more connotated by the idea of exhibiting than by a traditional domestic or working character, and its progressive process of occupation only confirmed this initial characterisation. After a few years, in fact, there was no more free space on the walls. Paintings by Antonio López and Joaquín Sorolla, sketches by Eduardo Chillida, and memories with friends Gloria Fuertes, César Manrique, and Soledad Lorenzo were mixed with Higuera's own design panels, drawings, and exhibition posters. And also tables, shelves, and floors were all covered by books, maquettes, ornaments and plants among which it was impossible to distinguish what belonged to his professional life or to his private one. For they were all personal memories indifferently collected and accumulated, and randomly placed as almost in search of unexpected elective affinities.

This is to say, in summary, that Higuera's home-office was neither a house nor a working space, at least in a functional sense, but the projection of his personality, as an individual and an architect, directly built, as an act of liberation, by his gestures, habits, and tastes. A projection imprinted by excavation, both in literal and figurative terms, which was reflected not only by its architectural structure but also by the objects, the artworks, and the memories in which he recognised himself, and which eventually represented its very significant apparatus. All arranged, like in a classic *quadreria*, by making use of a tight layout based on the physical size and consistency of the exhibits rather than on conceptual ordering criteria. With the final effect, halfway between a wallpaper and a mosaic, of rendering the evolutive complexity of his personal and professional individuality in the process of its deliberation.



View from the mezzanine of the studio.
Photo by Lola Botia, © Fundación Fernando Higuera.



View from the mezzanine of the double-height wall.
Photo by Lola Botía, © Fundación Fernando Higuera.



View from the underground floor of the double-height wall.
Photo by Lola Botía, © Fundación Fernando Higuera.



View from the mezzanine of the studio.
Photo by Lola Botía, © Fundación Fernando Higuera.



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