

Sol Calero's Pavilions: From the Bohío to the World Exhibitions **Text by Sira Pizà Airas**

The pavilion represents the most elemental expression of a building and the ultimate trajectory of architecture, from the hut to the glass palace. The word pavilion comes from the latin *papilio*, meaning butterfly, and it refers to the sumptuous shape of medieval lords' tents at military camps. Originating as an outdoor refuge, the pavilion is infused with lightness, impermanence and a blurring of the ideas of inside and outside.

In the Caribbean, the Indigenous domestic constructions were generally referred to as *bohíos* by colonial chroniclers across the archipelago.¹ These consisted of a timber frame that varied in shape and size and was roofed with straw, palm leaves and other organic materials. The sophisticated structural integrity of the *bohíos*' framework supported hammocks for sleeping family members and suspended storage.² Resembling the general archetype of a tent in both structure and temporality, their perishable essence marked a short life span for these buildings, which would have to be reconstructed after climatological adversities or moved due to a changing territorial context.

Some contemporary theorists of the Caribbean use the term "tropicality" to mean "the response to an environment."³ This becomes a concept which, rather than depicting an outsider's perspective on the region, describes an entire attitude and all-encompassing approach common among syncretic societies, representing the way they go about life and manifesting in areas such as architecture. It becomes palpable in features like self-construction, the use of readily available or decomposable materials, and an overall prioritization of the present over permanence and immutability.

Flooded with diversity stemming from migratory fluctuations connected to the dynamics of slavery, exploitation and the dependance of continental colonial powers, this area of

¹ Patricia Elaine Green. "Creole and vernacular architecture: embryonic syncretism in Caribbean cultural landscape." *The Journal of Architecture*, 27:1, pp. 21–43, 2022.

² Ibid.

³ Mauricia Domínguez. "Nuevos rumbos de la arquitectura tropical caribeña." *Revista usjt • arq.urb • número 6*, second semester, 2011.

the world presents a cultural mosaic or kaleidoscope,⁴ a result of the resilience, creativity and integration of transcultural phenomena that can be traced throughout its history of survival. “Tropicality” is then commonplace in the shared experience of the Caribbean, and its materials and aesthetics have become identity traits. When intersected with European influences, it created recognizable patterns that can be analogized to their surrounding conditions in what is referred to as a creolization process. Creole architecture took different forms in the separate territories, but the discrepancy between imposition and reality became apparent in instances such as the first English-Jamaican town built with bricks imported by the English, which collapsed almost entirely in 1692, after an earthquake and a tsunami. Adaptability to context was a strength that had to be integrated alongside foreign traditions and canons.

In the aftermath of this assimilation, we find a series of elements reiterated throughout the region’s buildings: similar to the verandas with African influences that developed out of some native *bohíos*, the post-colonial *galería*, or front porch, became a trademark of the pavilion-like structures of Caribbean architecture. The porch leads into the *zaguán*, a term derived from the Arabic *istawán* found in Andalusian houses that describes a passage, an uninhabited room that connects the interior and the exterior, the street and the home, the public and the private spheres. The steeply inclined roofs protect inhabitants from torrential rains, the ailerons over the windows provide shelter from strong winds, and openings on the upper floors create air flow, combatting the heat.⁵ Structures are light and translucent, creating currents and shade, filters and layers, rather than delimitations and fortressing. Houses are adapted to the topography and made with the materials available, expressing a sense of provisionality that responds directly to an ingrained instability, both environmental and institutional.

At the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London showcasing the “works of industry of all nations,” the glass pavilion built for the occasion displayed a hut from Trinidad alongside a series of domestic items and Indigenous people associated with them. The prominent German architect Gottfried Semper visited the exhibition and integrated the “Caribbean Hut” as a central theme in his research. In his foundational book *Der Stil*, he notes that

⁴ Mauricia Domínguez quotes Rafael Emilio Yunén in “El Caribe común: referencias del pasado, interacciones del presente, intenciones para el futuro.” Inédita. Centros de estudios urbanos y regionales. PUCMM.

⁵ Alberto Samudio Trallero. “La arquitectura vernácula del Caribe.” Revista La Tadeo No. 66, Bogotá, D.C. Colombia. Second Semester, 2001.

“according to Vitruvius, the marble temple is in fact nothing more than a petrified primitive hut, whose whole and parts materially arose or were directly derived from the basic elements of a wooden hut.”⁶ Traditionally kept outside of the pedagogical canon, the hut became regarded as a primal form by architects and theorists like Adolf Vogt, who developed illustrations to make direct connections between the Crystal Palace designed by Joseph Paxton and the Trinidadian *bohío* hosted inside of it.

Beyond the structural comparison of the fundamental elements of the Great Expo pavilion and the hut, the ephemeral nature of these buildings also emerges as analogous, and not simply because even the glass and metal structure withered and was eventually destroyed over time. In another sense, they have both, in their own ways, fulfilled their destinies as architectural myths. One, living on as an archetype of authenticity, is constantly reiterated in contemporary expressions of tropicalism found in tourist attractions, a recreation of the idea of primitiveness. The other survives as a milestone of the idea of Western technical progress and superiority, achieving a similar historical transcendence.

In the Great Exhibitions, the pavilion was a vessel created for edifying purposes—Le Corbusier defined it as a “boîte a miracles” or magical box.⁷ In 1931, the Colonial Exposition in Paris was the first iteration that specialized exclusively in showcasing the overseas dominions to the general population, publicized as “*Le tour du Monde en un Jour*”. Moving away from previous fair-like, carnivalesque representations of exoticized non-Western cultures described by visitors as vulgar, decadent, picturesque, or irrational, this exhibition took a (no less problematic) scientific and administrative approach to its didactic endeavor. Two tropes were segregated to demonstrate the colonial order: civilization as forward-looking progress, versus indigeneity as backward primitiveness.⁸

⁶ Greene, Op.cit., quotes Gottfried Semper, *Der Stil in den Technischen und Tektonischen Künsten oder Praktische Ästhetik* (Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts, or, Practical Aesthetics), trans. by Harry Francis Mallgrave and Michael Robinson (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2004).

⁷ Vega Méndez-Navia García. “Lo permanente en lo efímero: Pabellones de Exposiciones Universales, hitos de la arquitectura de la segunda posguerra.” (Tesis Doctoral, [E.T.S. Arquitectura \(UPM\)](#) 2015).

⁸ Patricia A. Morton. *Hybrid modernities: Architecture and Representation at the 1931 Colonial Exposition, Paris* (The MIT Press, 2003).

Much like the pavilions of Caribbean and Creole architecture as well as those built for the Great Exhibition, Sol Calero's structures are designed to be dismantled and reconstructed, taken apart and reused. They are an expression of the tropicalism's flexible nature, adapting to the context both formally and in their changing uses. They provide a stage for changing scenarios used by the communities in which they are built, and remain in constant transformation. Calero's series of pavilions also recalls a biographical memory of her grandmother's house in Los Llanos, Venezuela, where little distinction was made between indoors and outdoors, and where extended family slept in hanging hammocks protected by mosquito nets strung from the ceiling beams. At the same time, Calero's pavilions emphasize the tangible features that compose the kaleidoscopic Caribbean identity she comes from.

Across her practice, the blurring of inside and outside is present in different manifestations. The roofs, deck and *galería* appear clearly in *El Buen Vecino* (2015). The installation's interior spaces also contained outdoor furniture, and visitors were invited to interact with the self-constructed pool outside. *El Patio* (2018) recreated a courtyard with arches and passageways reminiscent of Spanish colonial architecture, while *El Autobús* (2019) took the form of a tour bus surrounded by a panorama landscape mural that transported visitors to an imagined territory. The relationship between the pavilion and the patio in Calero's work can be perceived as a mirror reflection of one and the same principle. In both cases, architecture only *frames* the environment: the pavilion is a concave gesture that defines the space below it, yet flows outwards in all directions. The patio, on the other hand, inverts this containment as a convex structure that connects to the outside by cutting out an opening upwards to reveal the sky.⁹ Alongside this repertoire of architectural installations, the artist's painting practice envelops her structures and objects, and expands further into mural and mosaic formats that depict flora and topography. Meanwhile individual paintings create a window into the natural landscape through a surreal, synthesized image so iconic that it often becomes a pattern and produces an immersive, otherworldly scene.

Commissioned for the Folkestone Triennial and Womad Festival in 2017, *Casa Anacaona* was built in a month's time with a local team as part of a larger project to rejuvenate a quarter of the city and involve different communities in the process. The

⁹ Carles Martí. "Pabellón y Patio, elementos de la arquitectura moderna." *Revista de Arquitectura*, 02. May 2008.

pavilion was outfitted with functional custom furniture, accentuating its role as a place of gathering. Multiple activities programmed by individuals and associations from the city were hosted there, ranging from musical events to classes and meetings. In this work, Sol Calero used seminal pictorial elements that had previously appeared in the three-dimensional scenography of the project *Interiores* (2017), where they seemed to leave the confines of the picture plane to inhabit the real world. This technique would soon grow into a new way for Calero to integrate painting and functionality in her practice, which now frequently becomes the architecture, the objects and the design.

Salsa music also reappears throughout Calero's series of pavilions, becoming a silent soundtrack to the structures via the songs referenced in her titles. Thus the aesthetics are given an additional layer of meaning, creating an atmosphere that defines the Caribbean experience: a complex and tumultuous history, combined with the joyous reality of shared rituals and the communal power that music and dance represent. In hindsight, we can trace this continuity from one of the artist's earliest projects, *Salsa* (2014), in which she created an intervention in a dance school in Berlin and brought attention to the aesthetic language that produces archetypes of Latin American culture consumed around the world.

Casa Anacaona takes its name from a song performed by Puerto Rican musician Cheo Feliciano—a tribute to the legendary Indigenous Taíno cacica (female chief) Anacaona, whose name means Golden Flower.¹⁰ She was a poet famous for her excellence in the traditional *areíto*, a narrative Taíno dance. In the year 1500 she became the leader of Jaragua, one of five territories on the island of Ayiti (first renamed “La Isla Española” by Columbus and now comprised of Haiti and the Dominican Republic).¹¹ Anacaona had initially advocated for a peaceful coexistence with the European newcomers, and her domain was known for harboring Spanish deserters. After years of conflict and many Indigenous uprisings in resistance to increasing settler brutality, her continued attempts at diplomatic solutions led the chief to accept a visit from the newly appointed governor Nicolás de Ovando, supposedly to celebrate their good relations. The gesture of good faith on the part of the Spanish was a ruse. They suddenly turned on Anacaona's

¹⁰ The song “Anacaona” is from Cheo Feliciano's album *Cheo*, Vaya Records, 1971. Composed by Catalino “Tite” Curet Alonso.

¹¹ “Anacaona, la cacica aborigen que desafió a Cristóbal Colón y fue condenada a una trágica muerte,” Carolina Pichardo, BBC News Mundo, 12 octubre 2022.

people, who had welcomed them, in what became known as the Jaragua massacre.¹² The chief was captured and brought to Santo Domingo, where she was executed on the gallows, becoming a hero and martyr of Indigenous history. The story, permeating through time and into folklore and popular culture, appears in the famous salsa song honoring her name.

Casa Isadora takes its name from another salsa song, this time sung by Latin music icon Celia Cruz for the Fania All Stars' 1979 hit "Isadora," a tribute to the groundbreaking dancer Isadora Duncan.¹³ Duncan was the daughter of Irish immigrants and grew up in scarcity in San Francisco, working at her mother's music and dance school since childhood. As an adult she moved to New York and later Europe, where she developed new approaches to dance based on "evolutionary" movement and improvisation, leading to worldwide recognition. Her push to restore dance as an art form and not merely entertainment resulted in many innovations, and she is often cited as the creator of modern dance, or simply "The Mother of Dance." She died tragically in Nice, France at the age of fifty, when her long silk scarf became entangled in the wheel well of the open car she rode in, ripping her from the vehicle. The song "Isadora" portrays her as a pioneer and a legend of liberation that cannot die.

Sol Calero's *Casa Isadora* was commissioned by the Brücke Museum in Berlin in 2018 and was used for different purposes until 2020, including performances, events, children's workshops, and as a place for visitors to relax in the surrounding Grunewald forest. It was then transported to Copenhagen Contemporary in 2020 and exhibited alongside *Isla* in the context of the indoor exhibition *El barco de barro*, and later traveled to Norway to be shown outdoors again beside the manmade lake in front of the Bergen Kunsthall in 2021. Most recently, it was acquired by the public school SeeCampus Niederlausitz in Brandenburg, Germany as a part of their participatory process for the betterment of their student facilities, and was installed there permanently in 2022.

¹² Nicolas de Ovando is primarily known for completing the Taíno genocide, which, through battle, massacre, disease, and enslavement, reduced the Indigenous population of the island from as many as 500,000 in 1492 to less than 60,000 within 15 years. See Bartolomé de las Casas, *History of the Indies*, completed in 1561 (New York, Harper and Row Publishing, 1979).

¹³ The song "Isadora" features Latin music legend Celia Cruz on vocals and is included on the Fania All Stars' album *Cross Over*, Fania/Columbia Records, 1979. Both "Anacaona" and "Isadora" were composed by the prolific Puerto Rican songwriter Tite Curet Alonso, whose poetic songs often focused on social issues and the empowerment of Afro-Puerto Ricans.

By naming her pavilions after notable, strong women immortalized in salsa songs, Calero imbues her permanent structures with a subtext reminiscent of monuments, and yet they function as sites of communal gathering and enjoyment. In the context of music and dance, we see the pavilion as a dance floor, a platform built on a timber frame anchoring it to the ground that quite literally resurfaces the terrain. It resembles many original hut structures that, like a deck, elevated buildings to insulate them from humidity and protect them from intruding fauna and flora. In Sol Calero's pavilions, as in most of her projects, space becomes a platform—literal or otherwise—for an exchange: the work allows for and encourages inhabitation, adapting itself in turn to the life it hosts.