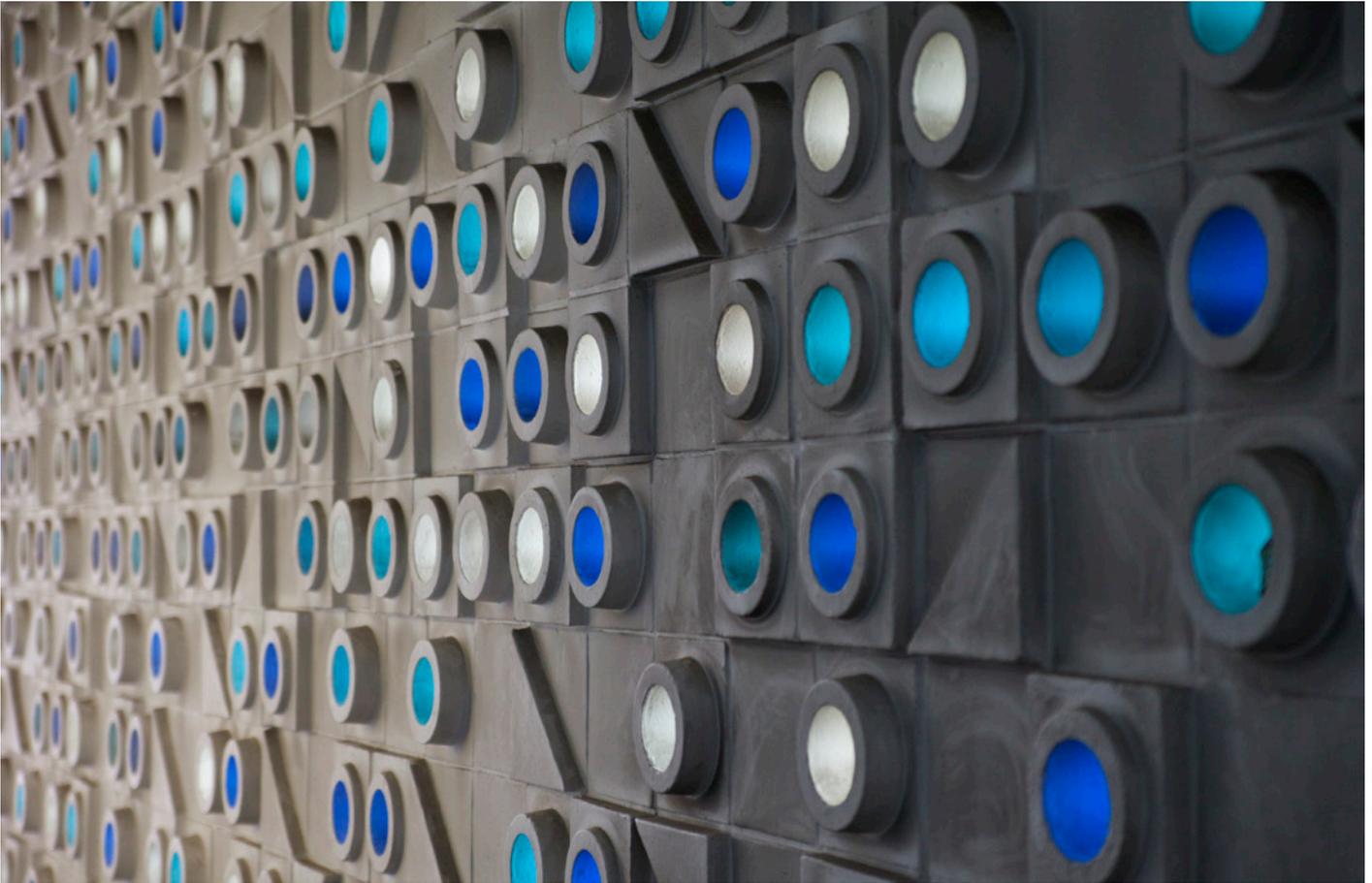




FAR

Frohn&Rojas

Profile



"Zentralbüro"
in the former premises of the
Polish Cultural Center

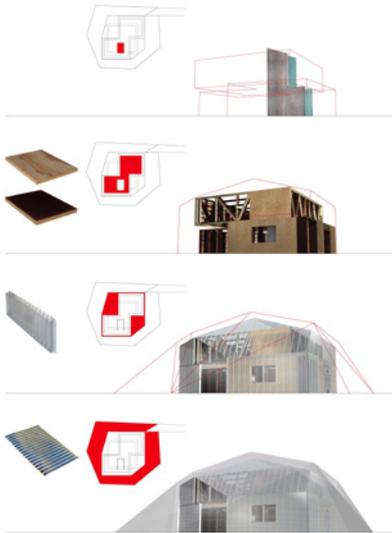
It was eight years ago that Mario Rojas Toledo, who was born in 1973 in Houston, Texas, touched down. On his way from Germany to Mexico he had organized a stopover to visit his college friend Marc Frohn (born in 1976). They had often worked together while studying for their degree at RWTH Aachen University, then Marc had departed, first for Naples, to Rem Kohlhaas, and later for the USA, where he gained his Master's. Mario had in the meantime worked in Oscar Niemeyer's studio, at gmp, and for Eun Young Yi. His family comes from Chile, and he has a large circle of acquaintances. And he now had an assignment under his belt. A residential building for a maximum of EUR 100,000. The 5,000-square-meter plot of land was on the outskirts of Santiago de Chile. The clients were due to retire and wanted to leave Germany and return to their home country. The two architects spent three days discussing how to go about it. Then they founded FAR.

Two people, two computers, two continents and Skype, those are the circumstances under which the home was built. While working for other companies by day, Marc Frohn at b&k+brandlhuber&co in Cologne, Mario Rojas Toledo for Bernardo Gómez-Pimienta in Mexico City, at night they put their minds to the relationship between the interior and the exterior, to spatial boundaries, and material. They designed their clients' retirement home around a concrete core, gave it several layers and created rooms that turn all conventional ideas upside down. They called their work Wall House, an homage to the famous design by John Hejduk, who in 1969 had asked himself similar questions. The building became a crowd-puller. When the construction workers began pouring the concrete, rumors spread in the neighborhood that it was going to be a high-rise. When they were fitting the polycarbonate imported from Germany around the wooden shelves, there was talk of a greenhouse. And no sooner had the neighbors got used to the sight than FAR stretched a piece of fabric over it which, during the course of the day, changes from a transparent skin to a mirror and which is normally used for cultivating plants.

WALL HOUSE

Suburban residence.

Santiago de Chile, 2004-2007



Not only the clients and their neighbors were fascinated by the strange object that had been built on the outskirts of the city. The Wall House was featured in magazines the world over, was shown in exhibitions and on TV, and was published in books alongside projects by heavyweight such as Zaha Hadid, Toyo Ito, and Herzog & de Meuron. Over night FAR became famous as the German architects had made it big in Chile. With their very first project. Prizes in Germany, Great Britain and Italy, an appearance at the Biennale in Venice, and invitations to competitions all followed.

In the meantime FAR has 16 employees. In Santiago de Chile Mario Toledo Rojas runs the operation, in Berlin Marc Frohn, in Los Angeles one of them takes care of marketing the Wall House, which they offer as a construction plan on the Internet, thereby taking up a current topic of discussion. Is a house a customized product or a prototype? And is there perhaps something in between? FAR do not regard the Wall House as a solution, but as a model.

NEW GERMAN EMBASSY - BELGRADE

Invited competition, Serbia 2009



It is the basic questioning of the assumptions innate in assignments, of “turning things inside out”, as Marc Frohn refers to it, which characterizes their projects. Nor are the designs FAR submits to competitions always considered to be a solution, there are no “precise contours with restrained facades”, as juries like writing in their judgments. FAR’s proposals are nothing if not provocative. For the new German Embassy in Belgrade they submitted, among other things, two images. One shows the facade overlooking the road with what appears to be a finely-woven aluminum foam mesh, while the other shows the facade after an arson attack. This was their response to the competition stipulations, which had 50 pages of security two pages of accompanying program; in their opinion it was a hypothetical situation, which had to be designed.

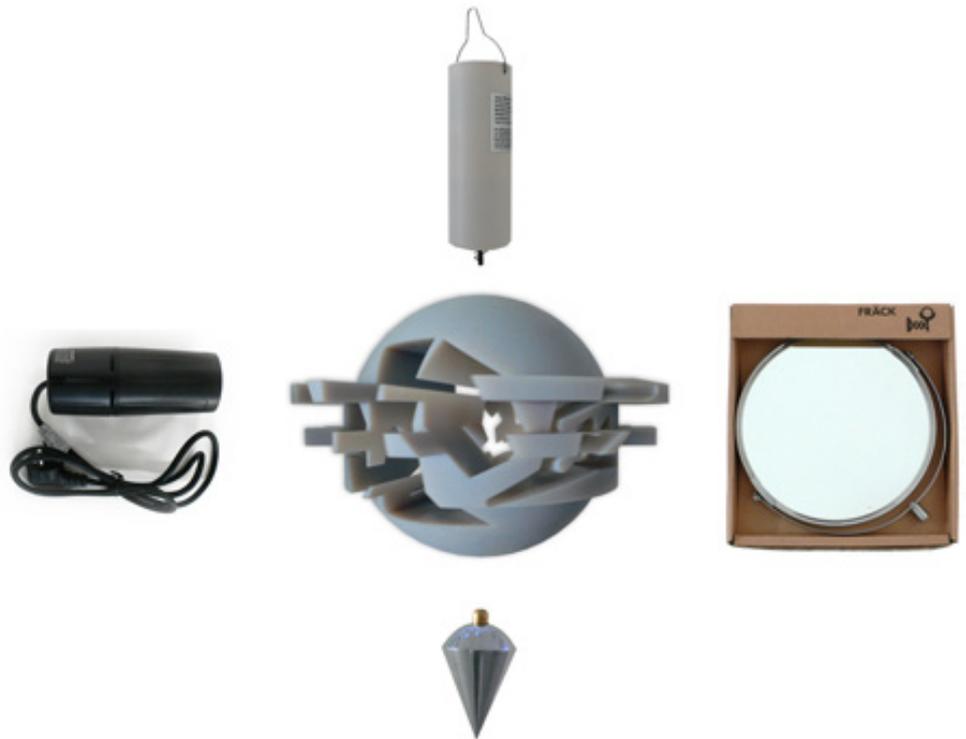
Where many an architect thinks in terms of the number of storeys and window formats, FAR initially consider how they can derive an overarching theme from the assignment. In this context the local circumstances are a welcome opportunity. Building regulations, for example. When they were adding another storey to a home in London they were confronted with the “right to light”, a regulation in England that exists in its own right and is independent of building laws. It states that with any window that is older than 20 years, 0.2 percent of the sky must be visible at table

height from the room behind. Or something like that. FAR checked the complicated calculation for the 27 windows in question they had been presented with by the, in such cases obligatory right-to-light engineer, did the math themselves and came up with three times the amount of space for the client.

Their "Hinterland" project is also about more than just beautiful rooms. They took planning a residential building in Cologne as an opportunity to give some thought the dense nature of the inner sections of blocks of buildings and developed an Internet-based software model. With this, given the floor-space index and site occupancy index, Google Maps data and land registry plans, it ought to be possible to visualize and calculate the maximum possible volume on plots of land. It is intended to facilitate communication between developers, neighbors, the municipal authorities and banks with regard to preliminary building inquiries and cut the cost of feasibility studies. A programmer is currently working on the fine-tuning, and a lawyer on the patent application.

GLOBAL ECONOMY

Part of the Architectural League Prize for Young Architects and Designers exhibition in New York, 2010



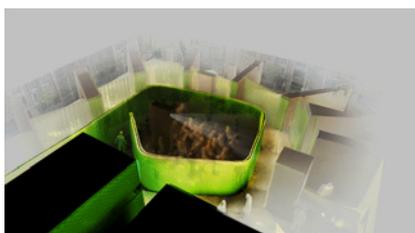
It is perhaps precisely this search for topics beyond the building site that in 2010 won them the prize of the Architectural League in New York, one of the most important for young architects in the USA. They had no desire for the accompanying exhibition to be a show of their projects, but rather one that demonstrated how they work. They had 3D elements of their previous projects, the silhouette of the Wall House or a cross section of the embassy in Belgrade milled from four polystyrene spheres. Driven by the motors that operate glitter balls, illuminated by spotlights and reflected by make-up mirrors from Ikea, the shadows of the spheres were projected on the wall several times their original size. This was a way of working Marc Frohn refers to as "mad science": understanding, processing, and reconfiguring the context in a way that is unexpected, exaggerated, in fact radical.

They took the exhibition to New York in their hand luggage. Like the models. The suitcases and boxes in which they transported their works to and fro between the continents are in some cases bizarre and are just as much a part of FAR as is the daily Skype session. Marc enjoys talking about the confused looks of the cabin crew when

GOETHE-INSTITUT

Temporary premises

Santiago de Chile, 2010 - 2011



he boards the plane with chain saw containers that have been converted into boxes for models strapped around his shoulder. During out interview there is one of these boxes on the table, in it the very latest FAR project, the temporary Goethe Institute in Santiago de Chile.

Because the villa in which the Goethe Institute in Santiago is housed has to be refurbished to make it earthquake-proof and bring it up to date with regard to energy standards, a floor with half as much space as in the villa, 17 meters deep and correspondingly dark, has been rented for four years in an office building. FAR has a catalog compiled of all the existing furniture from the old building, made partitions from them and positioned these in a radial configuration corresponding to the incidence of the sun. They countered the standard ideas for prestigious premises with bare technical fittings, an exhibition wall made of acoustic foam, and a moving curtain made of industrial cushions, which a Chilean sail maker sewed together for them. All the rooms boast multiple designs. In three years it will be interesting what far makes of the Goethe Institute's permanent home, the villa. They won't just stop at meeting the technical stipulations. The layered brise soleil along the courtyard façade is intended to lead a double life as open-air seating.

FAR recently landed their first contract in Berlin. It involves adding storeys to a building with 19 residential units dating from the 1960s and bringing it up to modern day standards with regard to energy. It is an assignment with model character. First of all, FAR will be asking lots of questions.

Interview



A laptop on the table connects
Marc Frohn in Berlin with Mario
Rojas Toledo in Santiago de Chile.

The route to FAR leads to the “Zentralbüro”, an office-share on Alexanderplatz in Berlin. Artists, architects, musicians, scientists, and journalists all work here in the former premises of the Polish Cultural Center. Prefab ceilings and walls with color glass squares exude the charm 1970s East German architecture. Through the windows of the enormous meeting room you can enjoy the view of the TV tower. Marc Frohn is sitting opposite me, full of expectation. There is a laptop on the table that connects us with Mario Rojas Toledo in Santiago de Chile.

Mario and Marc, you work on three continents. What’s the advantage?

Marc:

To put it loosely, when we started up with FAR in 2004 the situation was as follows: In South America you could build, in Germany publish, and in the USA debate things at colleges. Each in its own way is a good starting point for pursuing architecture.

So you are not primarily bothered about building?

Marc:

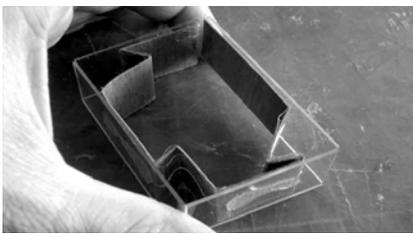
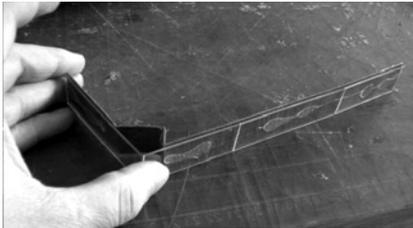
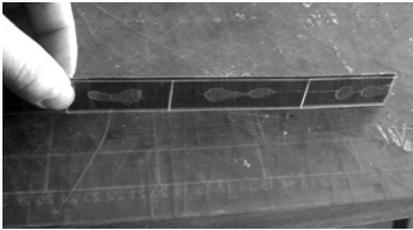
It goes without saying that we enjoy building but in my opinion as an architect you shouldn’t restrict yourself to it. Architecture is not just about putting up a sheath that provides all the right functions. Architecture can just as well communicate when published as an idea. Our output can be a building, but it can equally be an article, or an image.

What does that depend on?

Marc:

On the context. Having to do things is always a good thing. We don’t want to reduce our assignments to just technical aspects. We’re far more concerned with raising architectural questions that are of significance for the era we live in.

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WALL HOUSE

Suburban residence.

Santiago de Chile, 2004-2007

We want to know what happens when as authors we surrender control at a certain point.

Which questions would those be?

Marc:

With the Wall House in Santiago, for example, we addressed the significance of walls as an architectural boundary. Our competition entry for the German Embassy in Belgrade looks at security.

On your website you ask what happens when German building technology meets Chilean craftsmen. What's the answer?

Mario:

In Chile, there's no classic way of building the way there is in Germany. If the workers do not build houses, they mow lawns or wash cars.

Marc:

For the Wall House there were two categories of worker: Those who could weld, they got 20 dollars a day, and those who couldn't, and they got eight. The structure and specifications of the entire house are such that it is designed to be built by ten people. Only the wooden frame was prefabricated in a factory.

You offer the Wall House for sale on the Internet an. For how much?

Mario:

On the Hometta platform for EUR 2,000 we sell the rights to work with our design. Anybody can do something with it in line with local circumstances. There is one condition, however, namely that we be allowed to make images of whatever they make in order to document the "family tree".



Marc:

The DNA of the Wall House lies in the principle of breaking walls open, not in the materials, we could have used others. We want to know what happens when as authors we surrender control at a certain point. Things only become intelligent when others think them through further.

Does that work?

Mario:

The Wall House is not a bestseller. It's not that easy to separate architecture from personal tastes, it's not something you just buy on the Internet. That said, one version of the Wall House is just being built in the Netherlands though. On the island of Texel, as part of a holiday home complex.

How do you distribute the work?

Mario:

We complement each other very well. I'm more the technical developer, Marc does the concepts. He has an incredible imagination when it comes to developing architectural approaches, as he tends to see each challenge in a different light.

Marc:

Mario is the "Chilean terrier" who really gets his teeth into a problem and doesn't let go until it's solved. All projects have always been handled in both studios, in Berlin and Santiago. It's pretty crazy, you have 16 people working together every day, some of whom have never met one another.

Where do your employees come from?

Marc:

In Berlin our employees have so far been from Australia, Greece, the USA, Portugal, and Spain.

Mario:

We have lots of architects from Chile and Columbia working for us, and from Germany as well.



MARC FROHN

Zentralbüro in Berlin



Do you actually see yourselves as a German studio?

Marc:

The nice thing is that we see ourselves as both insiders and outsiders. It's very important to us to have a view from the outside.

We Germans tend to solve problems technically. That's a typical engineer's mindset.

How would you describe your view of German architecture?

Marc:

We Germans tend to solve problems technically. That's a typical engineer's mindset. For me, German architecture culminates in the term "passivhaus" (passive house). It says a lot about how we approach architecture here.

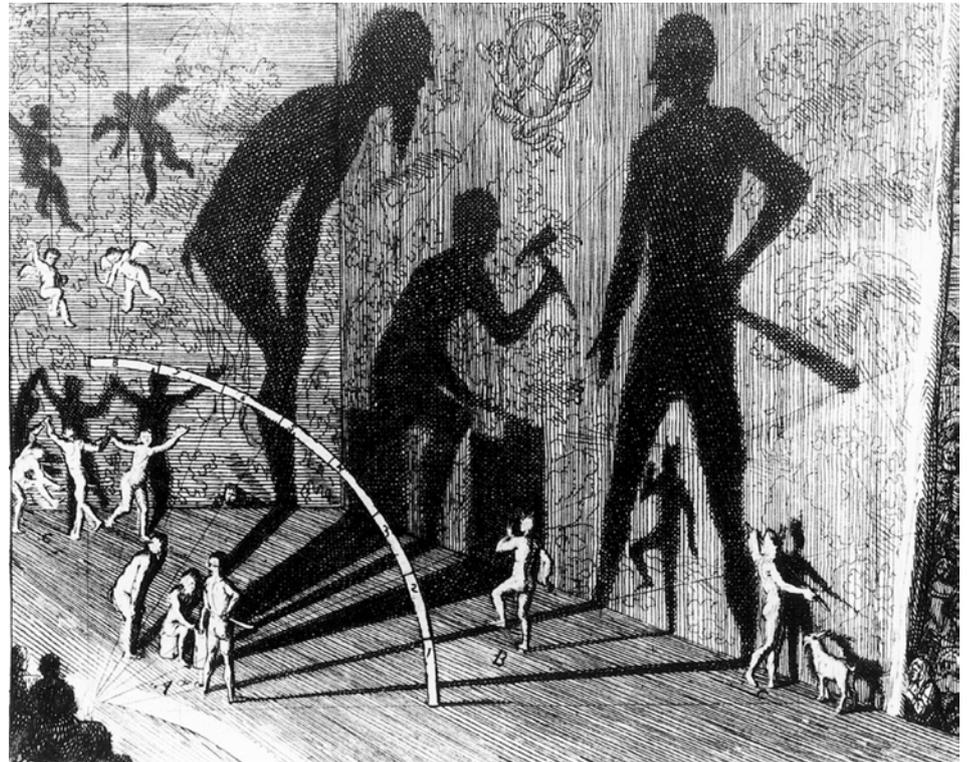
Mario:

Do you know how they improved the lighting at the bus station in Aachen? Typically German: They fitted a really complicated mirror system. Now imagine the same bus station in Mexico City. The Mexicans would probably paint it in a bright color.

Marc:

I get the impression that in this country critical reflection on the technical and social gets far too raw a deal in architecture. The engineering side of things definitely has the upper hand. I don't want to be nostalgic, but there hasn't always been this imbalance.

Marc, what was your experience in the USA, where you spent six years studying and teaching?



GLOBAL ECONOMY

Part of the Architectural League Prize for Young Architects and Designers exhibition in New York, 2010

Marc:

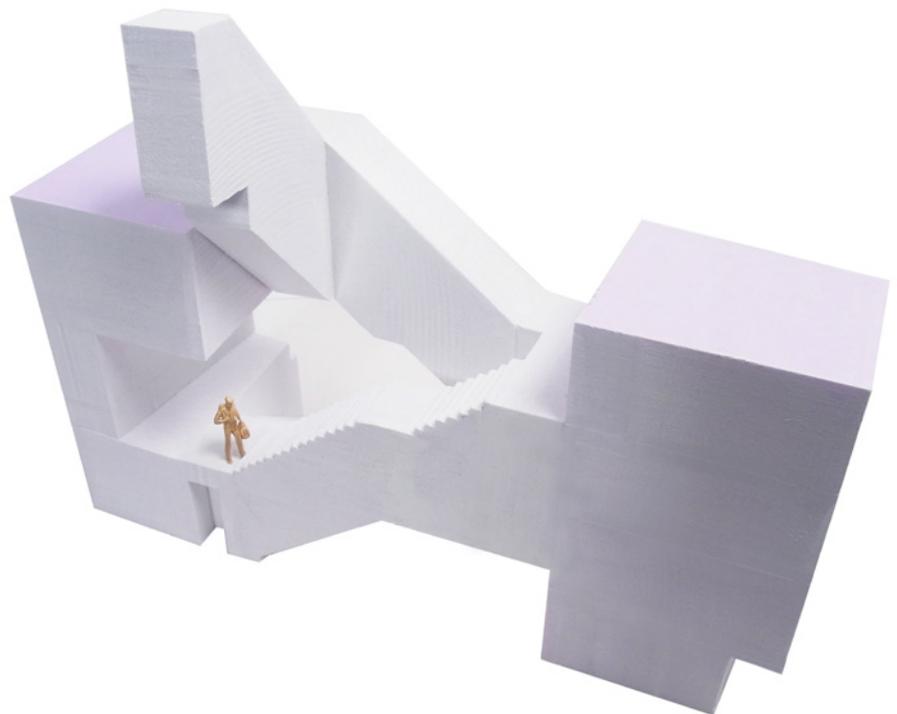
As a student I was impressed by the seriousness with which, for example, theory was addressed at Rice University in Houston. On the one hand, they read the classics, such as the Frankfurt School and the French philosophers, and at the same time, there were any number of interesting discussions.

I found the strict division between theory and practice in the USA a problem. All too seldom did a productive conflict between the two sides evolve. And it's precisely this conflict that interests me in our work.

Mario, you teach at the university in Santiago and saw to your local building sites. What can you say about Chile?

Mario:

There are now three generations of Germans living there, and they have left their mark on the country. Chile's architectural scene has come on enormously in the last ten years. A lot of people who studied in Europe or the USA during the Pinochet dictatorship are returning and bringing new ideas with them. On top of which the people are pretty easy-going with regard to the future, as opposed to Europe. I would like to see a German developer working with an architect under 30 years old and not having headaches about it. In Germany you're seen as a risk, whereas in Chile people see you as potential. We've benefited from that. The fact that we are now designing the Goethe Institute on behalf of the Federal Republic of Germany was only possible because we'd previously been able to build the Wall House in Chile.



What role do competitions play for FAR?

Marc:

Competitions are a good reason to concern yourself with certain topics. We've never landed a project on the back of a competition, but we've come up with a load of ideas for the studio.

Lots of architects make their design processes comprehensible in diagram form. On your website I noticed that you illustrate lots of projects using images merged together, for example the sun rising behind the Wall House or the acoustic curtain closing in the Goethe Institute. What is behind that?

Marc:

I am cautious when it comes to the cooking recipe method of teaching with diagrams. For the most part they fail to reveal the reasons for the decisions that resulted in the design. It often seems that there was only perfect solution that left no questions open. We tend to see ourselves more as architects who make the rules for a process, who create a framework in which architecture is possible. It's constantly changing and we want to portray that flux.

Architecture constantly changing and we want to portray that flux.

Projects

WALL HOUSE

Suburban residence.

Santiago de Chile, 2004-2007



**NEW GERMAN EMBASSY -
BELGRADE**
Invited competition, Serbia 2009



GOETHE-INSTITUT

Temporary premises

Santiago de Chile, 2010 - 2011



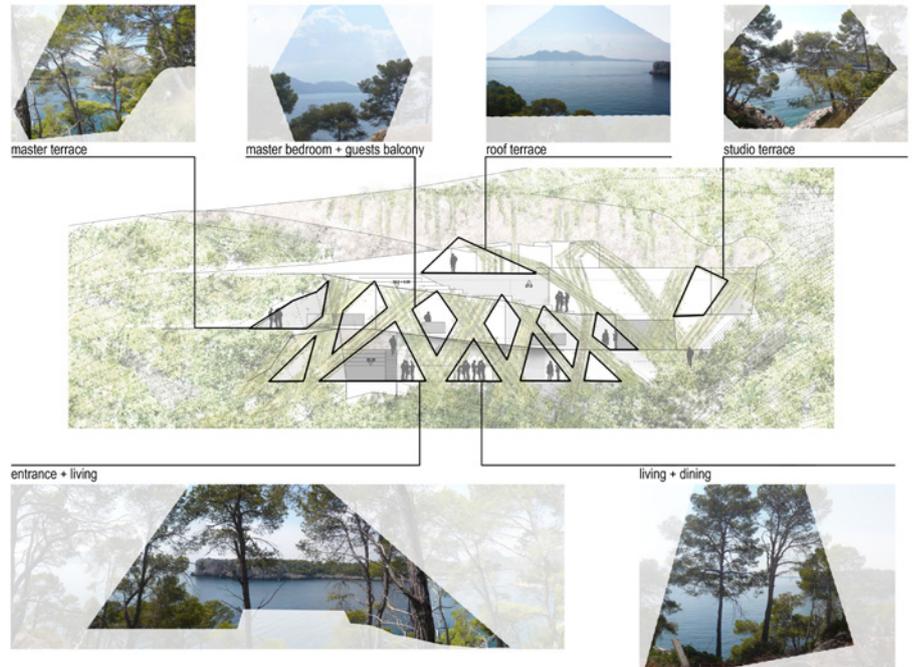
GOETHE-INSTITUTES

Santiago de Chile



HIDDEN HOUSE / HILL HOUSE

Spain, 2009-2011



GLOBAL ECONOMY

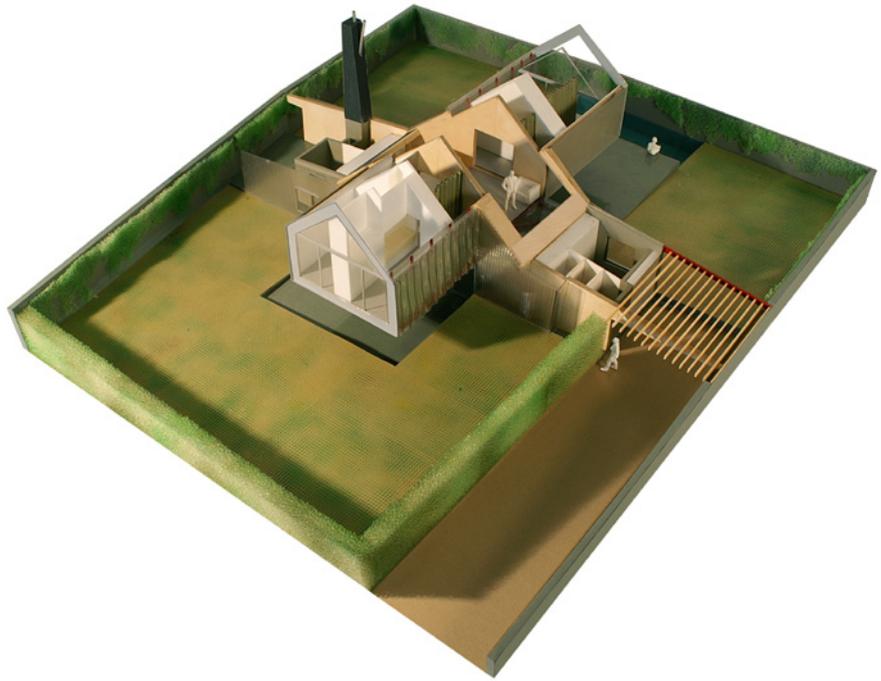
Part of the Architectural League Prize
for Young Architects and Designers
exhibition in New York, 2010



1 IN 2

Residence

Santiago de Chile, 2010 - 2011



2 in 1

Residence for two families

Cologne, Germany, 2007-2009



**CAMPUS UNIVERSITY OF
APPLIED SCIENCES**

Duesseldorf, Germany, 2009

