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in walls  
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# 'I never took architecture too seriously'

Didier Faustino speaks  
about old and new projects  
and why it's important to  
create 'bad' architecture.

Text  
**Ana Martins**



Love Songs for Riots

2013  
Courtesy Galerie Michel Rein | Paris | Brussels  
Realized with the support of Transpalette, Bourges

Portrait

→ Paris | Lisbon

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# B

Born on the outskirts of Paris to Portuguese parents, Didier Fiuza Faustino is an architect who has striven to break away from the boundaries and norms of his discipline. He remains on the fringe of societal prejudices, always in search of what he calls 'in-between spaces'.

Faustino studied architecture at Unité Pédagogique d'Architecture N°1, now École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Paris-Val de Seine. In the aftermath of the revolution of May 1968, the year of his birth, the school's left-wing teachers still believed it possible to change the world through

architecture. After leaving school Faustino went to Portugal, where he found it difficult to integrate into the country's distinctive architectural milieu but had less trouble joining artistic circles and being accepted by galleries. His halting, chaotic advance to international recognition included work as a magazine editor and as the organizer of an electronic-music festival in the Portuguese capital. He founded Mésarchitecture in 2002 – the studio has offices in both Paris and Lisbon – and he currently teaches a diploma unit at the Architectural Association in London.

**Of all your projects, which do you think is the most provocative?**

DIDIER FAUSTINO: Probably *Body in Transit*, an art installation that was shown at the Venice Biennale in 2000. It's a container for transporting a human being on a plane; it challenges the inhuman conditions faced by many refugees and emigrants. I can name others as well, such as *Love Songs for Riots* and *Memories of Tomorrow*. From the moment we begin thinking about creating something ornamental or aesthetic based on an object used daily for repression and containment, the result is automatically provocative.

But even when one of my works falls into this category, I do everything in my power to make the inflammatory aspect as inconspicuous as possible. I'm not interested in being provocative for the sake of provocation. The underlying idea in such a case is to show what happens when a pragmatic object appears in an aesthetic context – to show how the symbolic weight of the object or space is reduced or destroyed when that happens. It's that type of situation that fascinates me. At the studio, we've been talking about Michel Foucault's ideas on surveillance, control and punishment. Because I value freedom, my work nearly always focuses on how to abolish any question of control.

**Is it easier to convey subjective messages through art or architecture?**

My first reaction is to say that subjective views are more easily accepted in the art world. Subjectivity is not so common in architecture – it has more to do with art and design. The artist's subjective approach is a motor that drives his work and gives him a sense of freedom, but it can be tricky, because the liberty to 'do whatever you want' can ultimately lessen the effect of your creative output. If I want to make a real impact, it may be more important for me to concentrate on architecture, to confront the programme and the organization of space. Sometimes the message can fail when architecture is seen as a separate thing and the work is perceived purely as art.

**When did art merge with architecture for you? At university?**

I arrived at architecture by chance. I wanted to make comic books, but to study graphic design or fine art, I needed a portfolio, and I didn't have one. I chose architecture, because I thought the courses in drawing would help me to prepare a portfolio.

While studying architecture, I discovered passion. My fellow students were so enthusiastic about the work, and I loved how easy it was to go from sociology to technology to theory to philosophy. The fact that I was already a technician – I had trained to be a plumber – gave me the freedom to think and to develop the theoretical and creative aspects of my work. And because I wasn't there to stay, I never took architecture too seriously, which made it easier to stay abreast of the 'real problems', such as social inequalities.

**Your work has been characterized as a personal architecture that produces new, critical experiences, which subvert the social context in which the body relates to space. Quite a mouthful. Can you explain?**

That description alludes to the question of in-between, blurred situations, of my constant search for answers in a broader context or in another discipline. What I find most interesting in architecture is answering questions in a way that is not obvious. I like finding solutions in the most appropriate places, even when they're not in the field of architecture. It's a matter of creating ideal spaces, and sometimes you have to reject one or more postulates of a discipline.

I've never limited myself to one discipline. The proposals I receive are more connected to thought than to the formalization of a necessity. The paradox is that I tend to pose more questions than to find answers. Many times I come to an understanding of what's being asked of me by reformulating the question. Why I do that? Maybe because I do not see the act of building as a fundamental part of my work. For me, a theory or an experiment is already architecture. →

## Sky Is the Limit

2008

Photo Hong Lee

*Sky Is the Limit* includes a tearoom 20 m above the ground. Part of a resort in South Korea's Yangyang County, the tower offers a view over the Sea of Japan.



## Body in Transit

2000

Courtesy Galerie Michel Rein  
Paris | Brussels

*Body in Transit* is a container for transporting a human being on a plane. It challenges the inhuman conditions faced by many refugees.



'I DO EVERYTHING  
IN MY POWER  
TO MAKE  
PROVOCATION AS  
INCONSPICUOUS  
AS POSSIBLE'

Portrait → Paris | Lisbon

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'ARCHITECTURE HAS TO DO WITH EXPERIMENTS;  
EACH BUILDING IS A PROTOTYPE OF ITSELF'



## This Is Not a Love Song

2014

Courtesy Galerie Michel Rein | Paris | Brussels  
Photo Felipe Ribon

Villa Bloc in Meudon, a suburb of Paris, was designed in the 1950s by André Bloc. In 2008 current owner Natalie Seroussi began extending annual invitations to artists, asking them to interact with the building. In 2014 Didier Faustino realized an explosive architectural installation: a performance/event space reduced to its simplest form.



## Solo House 2.0

2014

Solo Houses | Matarranya | Spain

**Solo House 2.0 is one of a series of architect-designed holiday homes belonging to a project initiated by French developer Christian Bourdais. Construction on Faustino's house is expected to start later this year.**

### ← Was there a critical intent in *Sky Is the Limit*?

I was commissioned by the South Korean Eulji Foundation to build an observation tower for a resort in Yangyang that's used for conferences, seminars and holidays for Eulji's staff members. The resort faces the Sea of Japan and is near the border that separates the two Koreas. My first idea was two rooms at the top of a stairwell – like a place for negotiations between North and South – a tower with two boxes. We would pick up a shipping container from North Korea and one from South Korea. When you don't understand a situation well, it's very difficult to take a stand, however, so ultimately I kept only the idea of the two rooms. From there I started to imagine a situation that would involve two visually identical rooms yet provide two distinct experiences. I wanted an atmosphere of antagonism, two opposing situations, which we hoped to show with one open and one closed space. In the end, it became a tearoom, something very light that silently reflects on the political issues, which I didn't feel comfortable addressing directly.

### Do you have a favourite project?

My favourite is always the one I'm working on at the moment. So that would be *This Is Not a Love Song*, a small stage-like object at Villa André Bloc, owned and operated by art collector Natalie Seroussi. It is an architectural action, a performance, reduced to its simplest and roughest form. It is fast and imperfect, susceptible of being a failure. This idea is very important for me, because architecture has to do with experiments. Each building is a prototype of itself.

Having said that, I ought to mention another of my favourites. My very first project was a two-floor wood and plastic playhouse for children in my village. It was the first time I felt that I could actually build something. It's my 'zero project'. When I design something today, I'm still searching for the spontaneity

of that initial project, which was free of the obligation to achieve perfection. Everything needs to be perfect today. Everything is so hygienic and clean. Why? The name of my atelier refutes that notion. *Mésarchitecture* means bad, imperfect architecture. Even when everything is perfect and custom-designed down to the tiniest detail, the idea behind it can be imperfect.

### You were asked by property developer Christian Bourdais to design one of his Solo Houses in Matarranya, Spain. Can you tell us about that project?

I was part of the first sequence of his plan, along with Sou Fujimoto, Pezo Von Ellrichshausen, Johnston Marklee, MOS and Office KGDVS. The brief was for a single-family home with a swimming pool. Apart from that requirement, we had *carte blanche*. My house was supposed to be on top of the hill, but building regulations made it impossible. I had to build on a slope, and as a result the shape of the house I designed was a bit disconnected. I wanted a house that would not be occupied in the traditional way. It would be more like a territory to be explored. Certain volumes could be thought of as rooms, but essentially it was a house without a fixed programme, in anticipation of decisions to be made by the owner or user.

A few months ago, Christian was able to buy an adjoining piece of land, and we found ourselves facing the question of whether to change the story completely or simply move the project uphill. We decided to work on a new design, which is kind of an inversion of the initial plan. Whereas *Big Bang* – our name for the earlier design – had been a house whose spaces exploded from a central 'I', the new house revolves around the concept of continuity. Its octagonal plan, which offers infinite space, plays with the dichotomy of private and open. ←

didierfaustino.com