

“ BUDGETS CUT THROUGH THE BULLSHIT. IN SOCIAL HOUSING – WITH A LOW BUDGET, A BAD PLOT AND A GENERALLY DIFFICULT CONTEXT – YOU HAVE TO BE DIRECT, PRECISE ”



Architect Derek Dellekamp has designed sexy villas, funky cantinas and private apartment complexes in his native Mexico City and beyond. His favourite commissions, however, are the social housing projects that are garnering him international acclaim; the Architectural League of New York named him one of its Emerging Voices for 2009. *Azure* contributor Julia Cooke, who has long reported on Mexico's architecture and design scene, is well acquainted with Dellekamp's work and its influence on fellow architects in his home country. She recently met up with him to find out how his two specialties – the glam and the down-to-earth – inform each other.

Julia Cooke: What principles inspired the design for your current low-income housing complex in Tlacolula, Oaxaca?

Derek Dellekamp: The key part of the project is that it's unabashedly local and anti-global. I am opposed to these generic solutions to social housing; the product you propose for a certain area has to be an interpretation of the specificities of the place, in terms of the biology and climate, culture and politics, and architectural typologies. If you look at the prototypical model that's spreading like a virus on the outskirts of Mexican cities, creating a million problems along with it, it's one that responds in aspirational terms to suburban America: gated community, two-car garage, garden in back.

JC: Tell me about the project's aesthetic.

DD: Interestingly, we were trying to draw on this aspirational quality. Why will people buy these houses? They're looking for the suburban dream. Our solution was very obvious: we decided to reference what already has a cultural echo. Oaxaca has a strong architectural tradition, with solid, thick walls and bright colours. If homebuyers are going to respond to the American model, they can also respond to what's in front of them, the grand houses and haciendas of affluent Oaxaca.

JC: How can the philosophy behind this project be adapted to low-income housing across the world?

DD: By being a system, not just a product, and by being local, which generates a platform to draw out different answers to the questions each specific place poses. Chihuahua, in the north of Mexico, is totally different from Chiapas, in the south. One thing about the Tlacolula project of which I am especially proud is that I visited one of the prototype houses at 12 in the afternoon, when it had been shut up for days, and it was still cool inside.

JC: What else are you working on?

DD: Tlacolula has evolved into a second phase, and we plan to do many more projects like it with our current partners. We're planning to form an office within the firm that's dedicated purely to social housing. We're also doing a lot of research on social and sustainable development in the Third World. However, 95 per cent of my work is in Mexico.

JC: How do budget constraints help or hurt architects such as yourself?

DD: I see a budget as an opportunity; it works in our favour. In an age of so much dispersion, it cuts through the bullshit. Budgets make it real. Our work functions best when we're more assertive when it comes to interpreting a determined reality. That's why social housing is the most interesting of all: with a low budget, a bad plot of land and a generally difficult context, a project has to be much more direct and precise.

JC: What does it mean to you to be chosen as an Emerging Voice?

DD: I was really honoured, and also happy that another Mexican firm, at103, was selected. It's fantastic to know that what we do is being recognized abroad, which is important feedback for our work. During my talk at the Architectural League in March, I showed a selection of social housing projects. The rigidity of the programs and budgets forced us to imagine fresh, simple options that can be realized with local materials and manual labour.

JC: The urban sprawl in Mexico is pretty out of control. What can architects do to combat it?

DD: I think we have to step into the forum of regulation with real examples of our work. That's what we did for the 2008 Venice Biennial. A group of architects made imaginary spaces and worked in a regulation-free environment, hypothetically, to answer that question: what could we do? For our contribution, *Living in Here*, we proposed residential projects in Colonia Obrera, a middle-low-class area that's low density and right in the centre of the city. Javier Sánchez, the architect and curator of the project, invited 10 of us to intervene in 10 blocks as if the government were willing to expropriate the land. We wanted to have the guts to tackle the practical and imagine the visionary at the same time.

JC: And what was your project?

DD: Mine is centered on something very basic: what makes a neighbourhood work within the city? First,

public space works in proportion with how central it is and how much it belongs to everyone. When everyone can see it and everyone takes charge of it, the space is safe. Second, that public space also has to have a mix of activities, to make it a magnetic sort of destination. It has to galvanize community life. From that epicentre, we moved out and tried to determine how to live around that public space.

In a big city, community organization is much more probable on a neighbourhood level than on a city level. It's more logical that people will organize themselves within their area; the government here is so cynical because it answers to everyone and no one. In a neighbourhood, there has to be a sense of pride, because without it there's no way to get organized. Architecture is a very efficient tool for that.

JC: What's your ideal housing project?

DD: If I were a megalomaniac? It would be an intervention on a territorial level, urban planning. What's frustrating as an architect is that your influence begins so late in the game. I'd like to be able to try to resolve a housing project to have maximum influence from its roots.



JC: And what does "ideal housing" mean to you in the overall sense?

DD: There's that phrase that real estate agents say: location, location, location. Unfortunately, location is a luxury very few have in this country. I think "ideal housing" implies a certain connectivity with place: physical, cultural, economic, territorial, communal. If the architect only provides the architecture, he falls short. Working on the space per se has a limited impact.

JC: What kind of work are you hoping to do in the future, beyond housing and beyond Latin America?

DD: I'd like to have an anchor in social housing, but that by no means limits the other work we can do, which is more tailor made, elitist without a doubt in terms of its codes and resources. But there has to be feedback between those two worlds. In the '50s, there wasn't this gap between social concerns and an avant-garde aesthetic or academic interests. We've all fallen into our stereotypes – "So, what do you do, museums?" – and we have to work against them.