

Inspired by the, Desert

Architects Kayzad Shroff and Maria I. Jimenez Leon write about the practice and pedagogy of ELAP - Los del Desierto (The Desert Ones). This young Spanish partnership is the archetype of the young architectural practice of today; multitasking to the nth degree, and using every possible means at their disposal to see each and every project through.



Bus Stop in Ecija

Photographs courtesy Jesús Granada and David Frutos

They have been awarded, they have worked abroad, they teach in universities, they say the crisis is affecting them (less competitions, much more competence) and they have, for a very little time, been managing their own office; their folder for projects on paper is much larger than the one for built projects...for now.

In 2010, ELAP - Los del Desierto were declared the most promising Young Office in Spain by A+ Architecture, as well as one of Europe's rising stars, being nominated under the 'Europe 40 Under 40', an award organized by the European Centre for Architecture, Art, Design and Urban Studies along with the Chicago Athenaeum. Previous honours include being finalists in the first Architecture Biennale for Young Architects, 'Proxima 2008', participating in the Itinerant Exhibition at the Caja de Arquitectos Foundation, being featured as part of the 2G dossier 'Young Spanish Architects', as well as being published in *Arquitectura Viva* and 'A10 New European Architecture'.

Having met in Seville, Spain, in 1997, the partners, Eva Luque-Garcia and Alejandro Pascual Soler, decided to retire to the Almeria desert, henceforth going collectively by the name ELAP - Los del Desierto. This

name was born as a response to a mini-resume that the partners were requested to submit for a series of lectures called 'Lost in Space', organized by Izaskun Chinchilla at Alicante in 2006. Both partners are graduates of ETSA Seville (the Higher Technical School of Architecture, University of Seville), with Eva Luque currently serving as Associate Professor of the Design Department at ETSA Seville and Alejandro teaching at the ETSA Alicante.

In addition to their architectural studio, ELAP - Los del Desierto, in 2008 the two founded the publishing house, Irreversible, which primarily issues micrographies of Spanish architects, each being a comprehensive radiography of sorts on one particular project, with essays and articles by the architects themselves, in addition to responses by critics and theoreticians. The trajectory of ELAP - Los del Desierto reflects the perseverance and the never-say-die attitude of the partners; having survived numerous blows, in the form of lost competitions, unrealized projects, and unrealistic deadlines, all the while straining to keep financially afloat.

Being aware of and acknowledging the limits of persuasion the general public accords to young architects, ELAP - Los del Desierto intelligently utilize the

media as a tool, in all its forms - print, web, and video - to give voice as well as for generating debate. Opportunistically leveraging public opinion and utilizing the platform to reach a wider audience, ELAP - Los del Desierto falls within the category of a new breed of architects who show an acute reading of the control points of the society today and are well-versed in its workings.

To cite an example; during the construction of the Bus Stop in Ecija, their first completed project, the client, which in this case was the Town Hall, decided to stop construction as they were unwilling to remove the *biondas* (road dividers) from the immediate context. Moreover, the city officials were unsure about the colours being proposed. Undeterred, ELAP - Los del Desierto utilized the local TV channel to conduct a poll to gauge public opinion about their proposal and leveraged its findings to push their proposal through.

The architects are the first to acknowledge that their buildings are different; the architecture produced by the office possesses a loud yet balanced sensitivity, savagely raw in its immediate effect, albeit refined in detail. *"People find it shocking in the beginning, but with time they find it beautiful,"* says Eva Luque-Garcia.



Health Care Center, Velez Rubio



Nursery, Velez Rubio



Nursery, Velez Rubio

European 9

Their third attempt at the European (European 9) finally yielded success for ELAP - Los del Desierto with their entry – in a new area called Orestad, Kobenhavn, Denmark – being awarded the first prize. The formal strategy utilized a uniform block courtyard typology volume that was further fragmented, both vertically and horizontally, creating a multitude of volumetric variation. Perforations within the volume make way for pedestrian access all across the site and allow for three-dimensional lines of vision as well. The culmination of such a formal play generates a three-dimensional puzzle of sorts, generating multiple, rich visual accesses and lines of movement, taking into account sun orientation and ventilation; all in all eliminating the hemmed-in sensation of an interior patio. The 317,000 square foot program, broken down into 60% service facility and 40% housing, allows for a maximum of spatial and experiential variety, accommodating a continuous movement of circulation; fostering a heightened sense of social relations. The materiality of the facade, a dual construction, of a double glass skin along with either diversely treated crystals, polycarbonates, or perforated metal screens; allows for a variable porosity permitting a gradation of sunlight and ventilation from each surface. The double facade also protects the interiors from the prevailing winds as well as the excessive vehicular noise; all the while working towards good sustainable energy efficiency for the community.

Nursery, Velez Rubio, 2007-2009

Built upon a program that aims at the development of the psychomotor, mental and social abilities of children, the structure does full justice to the 'children's house'; the pitched roof being the element of form most identifiable with a home. The primary structural slab is folded in space, essentially creating a big house in which children spend most of their time. The structure houses eight classrooms for three distinct groups of children, a dining facility, a kitchen, and administration offices, all distributed around open-to-sky patios. Each of the classrooms is connected to open air spaces; and that ensures a continuous, ever-present interior-exterior relationship. The facade is made up of a system of panels that combine in the idiom of a jigsaw puzzle, which is then further utilized to configure the distribution of voids within the facade. The interior is painted in different colours, with the world of the children being separated from the world of others through inventive use of colour, a defining line at 1.3 meters differentiating the two.

Health Care Center, Velez Rubio, 2007- 2009

The Health Care Center at Velez Rubio is a 19,180 square foot structure, commissioned by the City Town Hall and one of the first major public projects developed by ELAP to see completion. Situated within a picturesque landscape, reminiscent of Gehry's museum at Bilbao, the structure showcases a playful material experimentation within its facade. An exercise in composition, the facade is a mischievous patchwork of corten steel, both perforated and solid, along with another reflective metal that allows for a selective transparency, a biased porosity that mediates the openings within the structure. The inventive use of materials extends to the interior as well, with a novel mix of both, material palette as well as textural composition. The resulting built structure, while setting itself distinctly apart from its immediate environ in terms of form and materiality, does in fact blend in seamlessly through an astute acknowledgement of contextual scale and localized formal adjacencies.




Health Care Center, Velez Rubio

Sports Pavilion, Gurrucha, 2006

ELAP's largest project to date, the 56,000 square foot Sports Pavilion derives its inspiration from the traditional agrarian typology of the 'Spanish Plastics'; inhabitable spaces that are climatically controlled, ephemeral constructions that pay tribute to the object greenhouse. Transposing constructional as well as experiential details across typologies, the Sports Pavilion attempts to find a middle ground and create a hybrid of sorts, fusing the operational and experiential qualities of the Plastics with the programmatic requirements of a Pavilion.



Health Care Center, Velez Rubio

Pushed by circumstance and being young architects in a time of recession, the architects were led to diversification into parallel fields of engineering, publication, and teaching. Such a varied influence leaves an unmistakable impression on the architectural manifestation created by the office, its traces being evident in aesthetics, techniques of construction, as well as material selection. 



Sports Pavilion, Gurrucha

