

SCOPRIRE IL DESIGN

ADVENTURES WITH OBJECTS

LA COLLEZIONE ALEXANDER VON VEGESACK



Paul Haigh, Barbara H. Haigh

ESPERIENZE COLLETTIVE
DI ARCHITETTURA
E DESIGN: LAVORI IN CORSO
NEL DOMAINE DE BOISBUCHET
COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCES:
ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN
IN PROCESS AT THE DOMAINE
DE BOISBUCHET

Collective Experiences : Architecture and Design in process at the Domaine de Boisbuchet.

Paul Haigh + Barbara H. Haigh

In most narratives that begin ‘...once upon a time’, the expectation is that a fairy tale will unfold in which everyone will hopefully ‘...live happily ever after’. Usually such tales takes place in a far way, enchanted castle surrounded by bucolic pastures in a magical kingdom replete with rivers, lakes and beasts of the forest...this could be the story of the Domaine de Boisbuchet so....

‘...once upon a time’, following the acquisition of a large part of his bentwood collection by the Republic of Austria and the City of Vienna, Alexander von Vegasack invested the proceeds in the Domaine de Boisbuchet, a 150 hectare estate in the Charente region of Southwest France. The purchase made possible the creation of C.I.R.E.C.A. (Centre International de Recherche et d’Education Culturelle et Agricole) and gave substance to Alexander’s concept of holding vocational and agricultural workshops in a rural setting.

Subsequent to the opening of the Vitra Design Museum he conceived of one-week international workshops, in their nascent state these were held, between 1990 and 1992, in a tent in front of the museum in Weil am Rhein. Increasingly successful and well attended, they became extensions of the museum’s summer educational programme. These workshops were primarily furniture and interior design based and offered differing theoretical and artistic approaches led by many of today’s established designers, including Massimo Iosa Ghini, Ron Arad, Borek Sipek, Jasper Morrison and Marc Newson, at an early point in their respective careers.

In parallel, the epic task of renovating and restoring the Domaine de Boisbuchet into a sustainable estate, following a severe two year deterioration under the occupancy of ‘squatters’, was undertaken by the C.I.R.E.C.A.’s vocational workshops until 1997. Several eastern European Institutions, including (insert institutions) participated in this first collaboration. It ultimately became the venue for the expanding Vitra Design Museum’s workshops, which were now being held in collaboration with the Centre Georges Pompidou from Paris and other leading academic institutions such as the Keio and Tokai Universities in Tokyo, the Pratt Institute from New York, or the National University of Mexico City. Currently, the workshops convene in mid-June through mid-September for 6 to 10 days and continue to be led by a diversity of designers, architects and artists. Participants are drawn from a worldwide cultural network and vary in age, discipline and expertise. Every year, the workshop programme promises a summer full of design freedom and innovation in a park like setting far away from the rigors of the city.

The portrayal of ‘Boisbuchet’ as a ‘park’, rather than a formal 17th century French landscape, can be traced to M. Chazaud’s map of 1864. Organizational clarity is at the essence of this egalitarian plan, ‘served’ spaces versus ‘service’ spaces are clearly delineated in a fluid, tentacle series of paths, pastures, approaches and vistas. A modern analysis might interpret the circular plan and radial layout of the vegetable plots, geometrically cut by the square plan of barnyard, as having almost ‘Miesian’ tendencies. The current chateau dates from the 1870’s and acts as the focal point. Turning its back to the Vienne river it rejects any contemporary romantic notion of ‘spatial vistas’. It faces west towards the land, its source of wealth, protecting its own arcadia, relegating the river to do the mundane work of driving the mill. These planning hierarchies are less apparent today, as the estate is entered bordering the river along the mill road. Any sense of ‘front’ versus ‘rear’ is lost on this approach. By the end of most extended stays, the chateau persists in the memory as artifice, emerging as an abstract silhouette against an infinite sky or the early morning mist, distancing oneself from urban pressures into the idyll of a rural context.

Most structures on this map remain today, including the chateau and outbuildings with remnants of the walls and gardens still apparent. The '*Dépendance*', '*Porcherie*' (the former pig sty) and barn predate the current chateau to the early 19th century, while the watermill and farm house date further back to the early 18th century. Stylistically, each can be characterized as '*charentais vernacular*', with each becoming part of the ongoing restoration and renovations activities. Today, the '*Dépendance*' restoration includes guest rooms and dormitories, kitchen and dining room, an internet cafe, administration offices and meeting rooms. Finished in 2005, the main barn multi-functions as a drawing studio or dining room, lecture theatre or performance space, with the annex containing the wood and metal workshops. The watermill became the first restoration project in 1992 and often forms the canvas for many of the participants project installations. Still un-renovated, the '*Porcherie*', reincarnated as '*Porkys*', transforms into an impromptu 'boite' with an eclectic bar and disco as it becomes the destination of choice for the weekly workshop party.

Through successive generations of care by the '*Comptes le Camus*', the indigenous flora and fauna on the estate flourished to include a large variety of trees and shrubs. Besides the sheep, chicken and horses that are part of Boisbuchet's farm, sightings of '*...beasts of the forest*' include wild pigs, deer, owls, weasels, lizards and nutria (coypu), a large, herbivorous, semi-aquatic rodent with a penchant for gathering and preening on the lakes floating dock. The creation of this 2.5 hectare lake was one of the first enhancements to Boisbuchet in 1992. It has become an active (canoeing and swimming) and contemplative (thinking and meditating) site element, in harmony with Alexander's enjoyment of water.

Re-forestation, planting additions and maintenance projects continue in the wake of the 1999 winter hurricane which devastated significant copses of cedar and other trees. The year round connoisseurship of '*regisseur*' Alexandre Avril, aided by his depth of knowledge of the region, livestock farming and the history of Boisbuchet, ensures a vital continuity with the land and the past. These essential duties and activities employ adaptive re-use strategies in practical support of the workshop and the estate needs. The main effect of the integration of the workshops into this rural setting, has been to strip away any inheritance of the '*bourgeois*' or '*aristocratic*' and create a framework for Alexander's' egalitarian and collective vision.

Finding this '*...magic kingdom*' can be hard, the simple left turn in Lessac can be easily missed, finding freedoms and new friends once there is much easier, taking home lifelong memories the easiest. From the first evening introductions, a familial spirit hovers over the long dining tables outside the '*Dépendance*', nervousness is eased, relationships begun, new friendships formed, wine poured, tattoos exposed, ideas debated — more wine poured. This ritual becomes '*quotidian*', as machinery and tools are silenced by the sound of the dinner gong, as footsteps on the crunching gravel gradually crescendo into an overture as participants and staff are drawn to the table. Food for that table, comes in part from the estates fruit orchards and the seasonal salad and vegetable gardens, along with a perennial supply of farm raised lamb. The task of preparing breakfast, lunch and dinner for a typical gathering of sixty to eighty people falls unceremoniously to a band of student '*sous chefs*' under the guidance of Alfhild (Alfie) Rodgers, the '*chef de cuisine*', who makes ample use of Boisbuchet's home grown fruit and vegetable as well as the delicious sheep. Dining '*en plein air*' in rural France should be a simple affair and at Boisbuchet it is. Where else, in the spirit of recycling and resourcefulness, can stale '*baguettes*' become '*bread pudding*' of distinction!

All the staff, both past and present, bring their individual contributions forward in support of the workshops. In particular Cerstin Thieman, who through her openness, kindness and embracing personality generated continual enthusiasm in her former leadership role. Malene Anton, now unenviably, manages designers, staff, food, supplies, travel arrangements, audio visual presentations and, of course, the ubiquitous laundry. Silvia Gross, has the complex task of developing the annual programme, assembling and engaging the roster of designers, coordinating the participants, while promoting and developing sponsorship relationships. Most summers, an average of twenty five workshops are presented. Each week two or three are held in parallel, with

each having its own theme and participants. A key element in formulating the international experience at Boisbuchet is the crucial cross cultural mix of designers and participants from all continents, interacting around a singular problem, exchanging their mutual insights into the nature of design.

A feeling of welcome at Boisbuchet was exemplified by Alexander's mother, Luise von Münchhausen who through her warmth and generosity, made us feel at ease during the difficult times of 2001. Her home, the '*new house*', has functioned since 1992 as Alexander's family house and as the '*visiting guest house*' through much of the renovation of the estate. Luise often shared her interest in gardening, plants and the state of the world over cups of afternoon tea. Following her passing, Alexander gained permission to create a grave in the Boisbuchet forest. This simple meditative setting invites family and friends to reflect upon and honour her life.

Each workshop places an emphasis on practice-orientated, creative work, and is complemented by an evening programme of lectures, performances and discussions, for which all participants from up to three parallel workshops can go in. Alexander has often stated "*...that the goal is not to design a perfect product or project but rather to offer meaningful insights into the design process and the associated challenges of rational thinking, creativity and pragmatic skill*". Today, as in the earlier years at the museum, the range of courses centers around multiple architecture or design themes dependent upon the initiative and creation of the '*guest*' designer.

Essentially, two types of workshop have emerged from this approach: the design exploration workshop, which encourages empirical play and experimental approaches in exploring specific conceptual or material themes, and the site specific architectural workshops, which offer poetic, yet pragmatic, '*design-and -build*' courses aimed at creating new and innovative structures. Begun simply in 1998, these architecture workshops first realized the structural experiments in bamboo of Colombian architect Simon Vélez in the building of a two-storey guest house with adjacent conference pavilion and a lake side shelter, each project being enhanced in subsequent workshops until 2006.

Realizing Alexander's vision of Boisbuchet as a place for innovative and alternative forms of architecture has evolved into a succession of discreet site works including architect Shigeru Ban's first European work in the form of a conference pavilion executed in compressed cardboard tubing, structural engineer Jörg Schlaich's tensile cupola, and architects Christian and Peter Brückner's log '*house*' and lake side '*pyramid*' constructed during 2006 and 2007 sessions. In contrast to the sense of permanence exhibited by the original estate buildings, these '*architectural works*' surprise in their use of materials, process and placement, each seemingly existing in a semi-permanent state with tendencies towards entropy.

All the workshops are '*hands-on*' collective working experiences. This pluralistic '*bringing together*' of participants in direct contact with the faculty, ironically, echoes several of the Bauhaus' founding principles, in particular the notion that practical workshops in design, architecture, graphics, ceramics, landscape, photography, glass and theatre can form a '*modern synthesis*' which crosses any conventional or academic distinctions between disciplines. This synthesis differentiates between what can be taught (technique), and what cannot (creative invention). It touches on the larger social goal of the '*creative individual*' preparing for today's world in multiple ways, from artistic to technical, by being equipped to contribute to a complex global society as a vital participant. This synthesis prevails at Boisbuchet and, ultimately, makes the workshops unprecedented and unique. This uniqueness distinguishes the programme by offering simple high level access, something that is mostly lost in the rote of many academic and institutional curriculae. In recent years, the success of the '*Boisbuchet model*' has been emulated in similar programmes in Taiwan, Mexico, Morocco and New Zealand, as such extending its influence into international design culture.

As 'guest' designers we appear for our seven or ten day workshop and then disappear back to our world. During this condensed time, divorced from our clients, cell phones and daily routine, we remain fully accessible to each participant, enabling a close interaction and a daily contact with each project. Through this *'intensity of contact'* our methodologies and processes are shared as *'one-on-one'* experiences, offering an important and intimate insight into our design thinking. Being *'disarmed'* in this way, at least in a design exploration sense, is as challenging to the workshop leader as it is to the workshop participant. Refining this interaction, designers who have conceived courses over many workshops, such as Toshiyuki Kita and Ed Annik, can map an evolving pedagogy, with significant feedback to their own design process.

The rural environment at Boisbuchet cannot be overstated as a stimulus for creativity. Wide open spaces invite both contemplation and action, many projects find inspiration in the surrounding nature, many workshops explore this nature as a source of materials and dialogue. Seeing a Michele De Lucchi workshop explore hazel branches as a means to investigate lightweight structures, immediately links nature's ability to inspire to the intrinsic need of the designer to create. Many others have taken the simplest found natural objects, such as stones, leaves, twigs and berries to conceive of designs ranging from furniture to fashion, architecture to artifice. Some of nature's oldest materials are now being explored. For the last two years, our collaboration with the Corning Museum of Glass on the *'Liquid Fusion'* workshops has seen the introduction of glass design extend the opportunities to participants to experience an industrial process previously unavailable at Boisbuchet. Similar collaborations within the programme include the addition of a ceramic design workshop offered with the L'École Nationale Supérieure d'Art de Limoges-Aubusson and guided by Spanish designer Jaime Hayon.

Every year we are amazed by the responses of both the experienced and the novice, seeing the *'...artist laid bare'* by the absence of the familiar and contemporary tools of design. The best ideas we see are sometimes the most obvious, sometimes the most obscure, and occasionally the most bizarre. To us that's the point of our participation; not to advocate a singular expectation or expression, but to see the ideas stripped of ambition, and more often than not that's what we get.

The *'...and they lived happily ever after'* part of this story inevitably embraces the immediate and long term future planning for Boisbuchet. Sustainability features largely in these discussions with the focus on, ultimately, creating an *'energy park'* utilizing alternate energy sources integrated into the existing and future buildings. This concept would extend access to a public education workshop program on all aspects of energy creation. Specific research could include ideas for the reactivation of the mill race and sluices for hydropower from the Vienne, the harnessing of power from the prevailing Atlantic winds which funnel down the Valle de la Vienne, the more direct utilization of passive solar and geothermal resources as well as hybrid energy systems.

More than a *'confection'*, the chateau retains its lure as the last and prime renovation project. Partially restored and protected by a new roof, it currently lies dormant. The chateau could re-awaken and once again become the focal point of the estate, with renovation concepts, proposed by various architects and designers, into a hotel and restaurant. It may reawaken to house the *'Alexander von Vegasack Collection'*, becoming a destination and retreat for curators, collectors and cultural tourism. For the foreseeable future, a cultural programme could see it as the stage and forum for concerts, temporary exhibitions, theatre and other performances.

These proposals are under discussion in the context of Boisbuchet developing and expanding culturally and financially under its own resources. This suggests further expansion and intensification of the cooperation with Universities, cultural institutions and

business. Enlarging the workshop program, by lengthening the workshop season into the spring and autumn, will allow access to more diverse cooperative programs. Physical expansion has already begun with the purchase of the adjoining farm, including 11 hectares of young forest. The recent creation of a product line inspired and realized in local materials and processes explored during the workshops, the 'Boisbuchet Collection' will continue to be enhanced, representing a further step along this sustainable path.

Since the Kominka Research Society's donation of three traditional Japanese 'minka' houses to C.I.R.E.C.A. in 2005, Alexander has worked extensively with Toshiyuki Kita and the Japanese City of Oda to formulate a programme to relocate them to Boisbuchet. As a prime example of sustainability, the 'minka' houses can be fully dismantled and reassembled as a means to teach traditional Japanese craft, design and architecture to international craftsmen, students and professionals. On completion, these houses would act as a research centre for Japanese culture in France, and offer the region a public cultural highlight of international standing. Combine all these initiatives with the ongoing reforestation and further preservation of the historic landscape, and a picture emerges of an estate in balance with nature and art.

In many ways, a parallel can be drawn between Alexander's early experiments and experiences in theatre to the stage he has set for today's collective experiences at Boisbuchet. The best theatre, as with the best architecture and design, is an assemblage of many seemingly disparate contributions coming together to form a unified whole. Italo Calvino, in his fable *Invisible Cities*, relates the story of another cultural ombudsman, Marco Polo, who poetically describes a way, for each of us, to escape the mundane and find space...

...the inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space."

[1]

Alexander would say his gift of space at the Domaine de Boisbuchet is not just for the realization of his desires, but for sharing the individual desires of all who participate in its existence. Projects that embrace the estate renovations and the workshops collective energy, promise the continuation of the Boisbuchet experiment into the future.

[1] Footnote.

Italo Calvino : *Invisible Cities* (copyright 1972 : Giulio Einaudi editore spa)

(English edition published by Harvest/Harcourt Brace Jovanovich translated by William Weaver)

Original Italian. (to be used by translator)

...l'inferno dei viventi non è qualcosa che sarà; se ci n'è uno, è quello che è già qui, l'inferno che abitiamo tutti i giorni, che formiamo stando insieme. Due modi ci sono per non soffrirne. Il primo riesce facile a molti: accettare l'inferno e diventarne parte fino al punto di non vederlo più. Il secondo è rischioso ed esige attenzione e apprendimento continui: cercare e saper riconoscere chi e cosa, in mezzo all'inferno, non è inferno, e farlo durare, e dargli spazio.

