

c a l c

L.A. >

Las Aceñas, from ex-industrial
village to playful responsibility

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Las Aceñas is a village on the Cantabrian Atlantic coast of Spain, on the edge of the small town of Navia. Since we have been building and rebuilding our “interactive cultural workshop” Casqueiro there (1991), we have called Las Aceñas L.A. This seriously-meant abbreviation with its ironic undertone already points to what we are about: we are after reciprocal influence in a local context, and a redefinition of what we can call a cultural centre, or what we can call “art”.

Las Aceñas had at the heart of its social and economic life a leather tannery, around which everything else developed: the workers’ houses, the supply mills in the valley

below and the few other buildings and their uses, like a small slaughterhouse or a small shop and bar, which however similarly had to shut down many years ago. Today, around 120 people still live in L.A.. With the disappearance of the small leather industry some 35 years back, the cement of the community also disappeared. When we decided to install our mother-ship on the edge of L.A., we were very well aware of that, and very challenged by it. For we had already for quite a while been enquiring into art, looking for its possibilities of direct relevance in a local context. L.A.'s social field seemed to us to be ideal for taking up projects and proposing them in the village context. We imagined that the repositioning and redefining of our art ought to show L.A. as both a "playing-field" and a "work", and obviously that would only be possible if we treated all the parts of this field as equally important, which meant being in a responsible relation with their inhabitants and their histories.

Casqueiro (c a l c = Casqueiro Atlántico Laboratorio Cultural) is a mill about 250 years old, which at the time of the tannery was its biggest supplier (bark was used in the tanning). When we bought the tumbledown Casqueiro, its terraced hillside and its warehouse ruins, we saw clearly that the change in its use also meant that at the same time we had a share in a new identity for the whole village. That is why from then on we called Casqueiro the "cultural workshop" or the "interactive studio sculpture".¹

When we (originally Teresa, omi and L°oks) began our work, there were basically two interests, or questions, at the centre of our attention: about new communications media – how far have they already arrived, how can information really be shared, and in that sort of context generate new information/ideas? and about architecture – to what extent can the production of new space or the redefinition of existing space lead to the opening up of new possibilities and the emergence from that of "new identity"? Since those initial questions, we have also, in the force-field between real and hyperreal space, been developing projects in and for L.A. – and to anticipate one thing right now, all this would not have been possible the way it was without our most important tool, the Internet.

The dynamics of relationships with our neighbours proved in the initial years to be both difficult and instructive. What were three foreigners with ambitions for renewal looking for here? Some rumours said we were spoilt, crazy, rich North Europeans, others that we were drug dealers, and when we installed our big parabolic aerial, that we were spies.

It was only once our plans turned into facts, our concepts turned into "things" people could experience and criticize, that the neighbours began not just curiously and cautiously approaching us, but also getting actively and openly involved. That points to the most central and most important of our methods: dialogue (or maybe "poly-logue") or what above we called respons-ibility. We had already long thought that the "crisis of art" exists mainly because it gets stuck in discursive blind alleys: now we could try it out and find out what happens when an idea opens up to others not at the end but the beginning of its development. That required us for our part to be "ideology-free", for an ideology defends a single standpoint that it regards as best. Dialogue taking up L.A. as its

theme could, however, be fruitful only if we took up as many standpoints as possible, in order to synthesize projects out of them.

After the building of the mother-ship, which took a long time because of hard financial struggles, we wanted to take a meaningful "transformative step" into the centre of the village and carry out the first project. This centre, as we said, no longer existed; spatially speaking, it had turned into an abandoned, neglected, walled-round piece of land. An invitation from a big Austrian museum for contemporary art settled that we would use its energies and resources for the centre of L.A. We bought the piece of land, and jointly with the inhabitants and their "standpoints" converted it into a public park. The purchase of the land was enabled by selling "orange art" - large digital images of the park's protagonist, an old orange tree. This experience was decisive for us all: we learnt we need none of us depend on the whims, or the "correct" ideology, of some local politician, and that we were able to alter something central and change things in our living space without excluding anyone. El Parque del Naranjo, L.A.'s new centre, was and is a cultural (r)evolution on a small scale, that works, i.e. generates quality of life, for those very two reasons.²

And the park brought more than the spatial reshaping of the centre: the neighbours had taken on strong (self-) confidence ("if that's art, then it interests me too!") and came up with more and more small, practical and different ideas. In a next stage, we bundled these into a whole catalogue of demands that we presented at Navia town hall with lots of nice pictures. These works (street renovation, new lighting, etc.) are to be carried out this August.

We tied these demands, following an invitation to an exhibition in South Africa, to a project we called now here: a park for L.A. In the meantime, most neighbours became able to identify with the initially strange reference to art, and understood why L.A. is no longer just some decayed ex-industrial village, but a locus of active, playful search for a new identity.³

Finally, since the space allowed for this text does not permit us to go into any further projects and strategies to build up L.A., let us very briefly illuminate in conclusion the "art history aspect". As already mentioned, we see this whole project, which does not end either theoretically or practically, as primarily one of dialogue, i.e. as "responsible". In computing language, we are interested not in an "author-program" but in "open-source art". That means, in yet other words, that our inspiration for "artistic quality" comes from outside, from the perception of social and aesthetic failures. In a feedback loop with our "own insides" and with all the other people sharing the area we live in, we cannot conceive of this quality of art without quality of life. What Michelangelo meant by "arte al centro" has found a spatial equivalent in L.A.

But the fact that this art looks like an odd, restless little village, and not at all like what we are accustomed to calling "art", has nothing to do with our being something more like social workers or service providers. It has much more to do with how an awareness of the historic achievement of artistic autonomy can work back again on society, without betraying that autonomy. "There used to always be God on the pictures, but now

there's only art left on them," as Dieter Roth once said.
Once, maybe; but today it's the "neighbours" on them.

omi and teresa > c a l c, 09-2004

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1. www.calcaxy.com/casqueiro.html
 2. www.ok-centrum.at/carteblanche/park/home.html
 3. www.calcaxy.com/now_here/enter.html

More text about c a l c in L.A. and Asturias in German and Spanish:

www.calcaxy.com/texts/index.html

For the whole c a l c art history see:

www.calcaxy.com/calc/booc.html

For our CVs and the c a l c curriculum see:

www.calcaxy.com/calcbio/index.html