

The Home of the Senses. Insights on Rudolf Olgiati's Houses

Luis Gil Guinea

Ignacio Román

“We build dwellings that, perhaps, satisfy most of our physical needs, but which do not house our mind.”¹ J. Pallasmaa

In 1944 Rudolf Olgiati settled permanently in Flims. He was 34 years old. From then until 1992, he built about 150 houses and small residential complexes. All, with few exceptions, were within a few kilometres of his own house. Despite this apparently limited range, over his amazingly fertile career he developed, house by house, a truly unique way of doing things. Sustained in tradition but radically modern, individual and universal, his architecture has transcended this local context through his own attractive language.

But his work also contains a valuable lesson that can be applied to other territories and in different languages. In an article published two years after the architect's death, the owner of the last house Olgiati built described the feeling that living in it aroused in her:

“There are houses that are silent, that say nothing. Others speak. Our house sings”².

How did Olgiati's architecture come to produce this feeling? His language is characteristic and loaded, but the house is discreet, carefully settled on the ground. The materiality and the colours are tuned to the constructions around it. Openings are made cautiously and the building contains simple furniture and objects. How then? By means of a careful harmony between all the house's elements and the surrounding nature, through an exceptional sensitivity to the perceptions of the inhabitant, Olgiati manages to elevate the modern house beyond the architectural object.

At the same time that Olgiati was building his first houses, Gaston Bachelard published *The Poetics of Space*³. In parallel with some aspects described by the philosopher in his approach to the concept of home, Olgiati's house ‘sings’ because it perhaps becomes a nest for the mind and the emotions, an intimate place for memory and dreams, an instrument that allows the inhabitant, in Bachelard's words, “to face the cosmos”. Bielander, the owner of the last house he built, expresses, with the idea of singing, how her senses reverberate and intensify in it, taking refuge there to grow like notes in a sounding board.

Henceforth we will try to elaborate on this observation. We will start by pointing out several specific aspects of the architect's training which are instrumental to an understanding of his character and sensitivity. Then we will analyse some of the architectural elements that Olgiati himself described, extracting meanings that can bring us closer to this extraordinary attribute of his houses.

Towards another architecture

Educated away from his family in various schools, and orphaned at the age of 10, Olgiati soon learned to concentrate on his inner self and develop his own abilities. This early ‘inside-out’ focus was reinforced by the life philosophy of the American writer and educator Ralph Waldo Trine, passed on to him, as a teenager, by his teacher, with strong impact. According to Trine, a continuator of Emerson's transcendentalist ideas, we create our own world. What happens to us on the outside is a consequence of our inner attitude. Mental states and emotions have an effect on our bodies and the flow of events around us. The Danish educator and doctor Jørgen Petersen Müller's writings about healthy lifestyle also had a major impact on the young Olgiati. He did physical exercise all this life, and was always extremely austere⁴ [Fig. 03]. His strong tendency towards autonomy was shaped by independent thinking. His state of mind was his most important energy, together with physical discipline.

Olgiati's interest in art began in childhood, first through his mother and then through his older sister. Painting, the value placed on domestic objects and furniture, the books with photographs of English country houses that his sister brought from New York and London, where she studied and worked as an interior designer, all attracted his attention. Naturally discreet, his curiosity was founded on observation. Thanks to the books at home and in the libraries he frequented, along with all the images that opened up his imagination, he started to create a world of interests and a high level of visual criticism. At the age of seventeen, he found in Chur's library a German translation of Le Corbusier's *Towards an Architecture*. Shortly afterwards he travelled to Stuttgart to visit the recently finished Weissenhof Siedlung, and with the strong impression that Le Corbusier's work there made on him, he decided to study architecture.

At ETH Zurich, Olgiati found a very polarized atmosphere. The strength of the proposals and the ideology of the modern architects there were counterbalanced by solidly anchored positions. Some professors distanced themselves from what they understood to be a radical and passing trend, and focused their attention on correct practice and permanent values⁵. This division defined Olgiati's approach, which was decidedly modern in attitude, but with an eye on local language and its effectiveness.

At the age of 20 he inherited a house with a barn which had belonged to his mother. It had a large garden in front of the main road

in Flims. During summers, the young student and his brother Guido dismantled all kinds of elements which successive refurbishments had added to the house: floor and wall coverings, decorative paint, trimmings... and a large part of the interior layout as well as the garden. They wanted to bring the house back to its original form, as depicted in old images that they had kept. As the works progressed, they encountered opposition from the neighbours, who considered them a provocation, an excessively modern design. His natural liking for controversy and for action against popular trends led Olgiati to stay in Flims and try to transform the whole area, piece by piece.

Olgiati experimented with his own house, the 'birthplace' to which, as Bachelard suggests, he returned to recall original feelings and gestures. Throughout his life he stored objects and antique and modern furniture in the barn, repairing them and using them in his works. From his own perceptive experience he developed and perfected a language that was personal and identifiable, but based on universal concepts that could to produce the same feelings in any observer. The houses built over fifty years of work are composed of a few architectural elements, and reflect the same intention. They transcend their physical properties, transforming into a territory for the intimacy, memory and senses of each inhabitant, just as his home had become for him.

We will try to analyse some of these composition elements through Olgiati's own reflections, and to extract aspects that would bring us closer to the emotional dimension they were trying to achieve.

The shell

The house always began as an outline in drawings, which the architect made and broke, agile and firm. It was a protracted beginning, with no clear order, without trying to respond to the functional program, but rather intending to find the form of the place, to select a part of the natural environment, in a sculptural sense. The exterior walls, planes cut out of the landscape, are expressed as canvases, which wrap around themselves to isolate a fraction of the territory, already subject to the laws of geometry and gravity..

"If you do not want to house people in cubic, sharp-edged spaces, such as the floors of a high-rise building, try to isolate an ideal area from the rest of the environment, and turn it into the Sesame. Doing this is a pleasure for the architect, especially in an unpleasant environment".⁶

A shell embedded in the ground that delimits a place chosen and shaped by both man and nature, the primitive refuge. Olgiati proposes a cave upon the ground. The roof is placed sunk between the walls, like a folded sheet in the colour of the shadow, merged with the mountains, and ends up shaping the interior space, definitively attached to the slope. There are no eaves or copings on the wall, nor are there any shadows cast on its surface. The piece is cut cleanly against the atmosphere,

and the volume decided by the architect emerges as a crystalline rock [Fig. 04].

"Light, along with *föhn*⁷ and snow, is often unbearably blinding in the mountains".⁸

The holes that connect it to the outside are drawn from inside out. The light reflected on the snow, the hot and drying wind that descends from the summit, the free space of the garden in the sun, the views of the valley, the engagement with the nearby houses or the arrival path, are modulated and directed from the interior space. A variety of openings with different proportions and shapes are spontaneously distributed within the shell.

For Olgiati, the sun and light are not treated in the same way. In winter, white glare is annoying, but the sun is necessary indoors. However, green tints the house pleasantly in summer, when direct radiation should be avoided.

The arch appears as the natural way to open the cave. The house's entrance door and garage and the exit to the garden are excavated into the wall with curved geometries drawn specifically for each place, sometimes near the midpoint, sometimes lowered and tempered. On the entrance doors, the wooden carpentry, placed on the inner side of the wall, is carefully detailed with ornamental intention, mounted on geometric pieces, as a courtesy to the visitor waiting in front. In the openings towards the garden, the enclosure is arranged behind the arch, leaving a covered space that vibrates freely with the environment. The threshold is sized in such a way that sunlight on the longest day reaches the point where the glazing is located. This is dematerialised in the shade and the garden looks inwards as much as the room looks outwards. The changing light during the day, and the passage of the seasons reflected in the garden, infinitely transform this place. It is a small chamber in which the light effects are amplified, and the sights and sounds are concentrated.

The windows, eyes on the house's shell, frame parts of the exterior and grade each space inside. If it is imposing, the house grants the corner and opens at that weak point, a gesture of admiration. On other occasions the opening is reduced as it goes deeper into the thickness of the wall, as a mechanism to control the intensity. The light in the interior is very dimmed and focused on a specific point in each room, with the quality of a standing lamp well placed within the room. The resulting atmosphere is, as Olgiati says, "the true essence of calm and richness".⁹

Wall and roof continuity is broken by other deep and wide gaps, shaded porches between the garden and the interior of the house, sometimes supported by robust columns. These, hollow and moulded, slightly reduce their contour with height, and leave a delicate shadow joint with the lintel. At the mouth of the irregularly shaped cave embedded in nature, the cylindrical pillar becomes a geometric presence, abstract and plastic, beyond its strictly utilitarian nature [Fig. 06]. Functional elements do not diminish the

essential character of the house. Quite the opposite, the constructive solutions reflect a mixture of efficiency and modesty, and the practical aspects seem to be effortlessly resolved. The chimney appears as another element within the ensemble of vertical walls, piercing the dark surface of the roof. A roof that is drained through gargoyles, expressed like protrusions in the shell that lead the slopes to the appropriate side.

"Because a few drops of rain fall will not make a house less beautiful"¹⁰.

The fireplace, the stairs and the furniture

From the first drawings, Olgiati tries to think of the house as a set of places, each one with its function and its appropriate form, interlocked through different levels and stairs, drawn with spontaneity. The rooms are initially regular pieces, but in the course of the design process are deformed on plan and adapted to the topography to produce fluid connections between them and with the outside. The aim is to achieve the atmosphere described by the architect himself:

"the atmosphere in which one can really live. Just as a plant needs a soil and a climate, people need an environment that stimulates their imagination and in which their skills can develop"¹¹.

The living spaces are arranged around the fireplace. Levelled with the floor, it is perceived as one more hole in the wall. Next to it, built-in seating, furnished with large cushions, establishes a permanent and solid place. In front of the fireplace, the porch, the arch and the deep window direct one's view and modulate the light. The warm and stony shelter of the cave interior connects intensely with nature, in a way that is at the same time well-tempered and stimulating [Fig. 06].

The kitchen is directly linked to this place, and configured as a combination of storage furniture embedded in the walls with modern appliances, forming a compact functional front, always next to a space in which to sit at the table.

Other elements worked out on the wall complete the fixed furniture of the day area, in dialogue with the exterior and fitting out rooms for work, reading or music.

The layout of the staircase is complex, irregular, curved, or, in different sections, misaligned, like a route planned by nature. Often placed around the fireplace, the staircase offers an experience of movement and a dynamic sense in the space around it. You walk up and down in a magical way, not counting the steps, which are fused to the wall with the same material. A well-measured opening towards the landscape, books or objects complete and mark out the passage, housed in the nooks of the walls that surround it [Fig. 08].

Olgiati understands the exterior as a plastic form in the environment, and the interior as a counter-form to it. They are the result of one another and vice versa, without any

hierarchy. The outer shell poses a geometry that is articulated in the landscape and the atmosphere, but is defined from the previous structure of the inner space. At the same time, the interior is tightly carved, creating places which are tailored to the inhabitant and the function, but within the piece obtained from figurative principles. Like a violin case, the interior and exterior form are compatible with the object they embrace, but each one depends on their particular demands.

Both are orchestrated through the skilful and meditated play of mass with void, which produces a precise choreography of light and shadow, inside and out. The interior of the house then reaches a delicate balance between the sense of deep and serene enclosure and the vivid, changing perception of nature.

The colour and the material

"Form issues cannot be solved with colours"¹².

White, for Olgiati, is the absence of black. Any colour contains, even minimally, some black. This means the destruction of the shape, the loss of reference. If the house aspires to the plastic beauty of a cut crystal and the coherence of a calm interior, its walls must be white and confront the shadow of the gaps and the vibrant colour of nature. Colours cannot be used to arrange light and geometry, as they imply a concession to their opposites, darkness and chaos. In Olgiati's houses the walls, built with prefabricated blocks, are covered with a perfect layer of whitewashed plaster. The roughness of other finishes would trap the light and dissolve the power of the wall. The non-porous surface of the paint would allow the water to slip with traces of dust, tarnishing the façade. However, lime –flexible, porous and cheap – is the right material. It produces a pure white that reflects the light and defines the forms. In addition, the particles of the atmosphere mix with water and produce, collected in the pores of the surface, a homogeneous patina that improves with time.

The roof, leaning between the white walls, is covered with large flat grey stone slabs from local quarries. The exterior floors, made of the same stone, extend into the garden. Cut in irregular shapes, the slabs are placed on the sloping plane without any apparent order, as if the refuge proposed by the walls were covered by the mountain itself. The roof is allied with the shadows of the holes and the overhangs, loses the folded shape that resolves the water, and gives way to the cubic geometries of the vertical planes.

The wood in the carpentry, in the structure of the floors and in the floorboards is treated with soap, without varnish. Over time, it acquires a grey tone and soft texture, blending with the colour of the stone and the outside environment, and producing neutral surfaces in the interior. Only when the floor must reflect the light is it painted matt white, in continuity with the walls.

The white and grey ambience is completed by textiles, blended in colour and with a pleasant feel. Carpets made of natural fibres

or thick wool are laid out in the rooms, while felt is used in the areas of passage and stairs. Sofas and seat cushions by the fireplace are upholstered in sand-coloured linen, as are the curtains at the windows. Only a few pieces of furniture need to be added to this architecture: table, chairs and bed. These are originally antique, restored by Olgiati himself, or radically modern, and always inexpensive.

The calm continuity of the interiors is nuanced and sometimes transformed into movement and colour through the last material, light. The curtains are lined on the outside with coloured silk, selected walls in the kitchen and bathroom are covered with yellow, green or blue glazed ceramic. In a programmed succession, the rooms are illuminated by dyeing them with the white of snow, the green of the garden, the clay colour of the silk or the yellow of the tile, by means of homogeneous light that enters freely through the bigger holes or focused on chosen points by the deep windows. The stable and serene shelter of the cave presents plays of reflections and the eventual powerful chiaroscuro. The space vibrates with its different textures and tones, and then expresses all its capacity to attract and inspire [Fig. 09 y Fig.10].

The house of Olgiati, home for the senses

All the ingredients of Olgiati's architecture are common and constant in many other architectures. But in his, they are abstracted from their original and usual form, and treated with special delicacy. Vernacular and classical components are transformed through a personal, natural language. They are chosen and arranged, related to each other and to the environment, with an exceptional intuition, capable of creating images, places and atmospheres that, without separating themselves from the ordinary, make them a comforting stimulus for the senses.

In Olgiati's architecture, the harmonious combination of a limited set of elements produces, as in mathematics and music, an unlimited variety of pieces. All these houses, far from the trends and styles proposed by European architecture in his time, can be understood as a single composition that pursues a sole objective: to touch with emotional distinction the close, the concrete, and the useful, through the sensitive application of the universal and the abstract.

As previously suggested, this architecture offers perhaps a built form for the idea of home that Bachelard formulated around the same time, an idea later taken up by authors like Pallasmaa¹⁴. It tries to overcome the objectual character of the modern house and elevate it to the place where the mind and the senses also find refuge. In the analysis carried out, we have gained understanding of a deep relationship between both architectures, physical and philosophical. The birth house is the origin of experimentation, and in some way it is present in all the others. Olgiati's intention is to build in each house a first intimate, humble universe, which serves as a threshold to nature. Where thoughts and memories are integrated, through the senses

that resonate in the multiplicity of small spaces capable of keeping time at rest. In them, the inhabitant will return to childhood, nourished by suitable, essential materials and objects. They are houses that are difficult to describe, made up of corners intermingled in a gentle penumbra. Concentrated, sheltered in a bright white shell. Their roofs reveal their primitive and protective character, cut out against the clouds, like small castles embraced by the hillside. They improve with winter, wrapped in the white of the snow and the clouds. Through the deep window you can see a vibrant light at night. Inside, the fire is at the centre, and the narrow, winding staircase leads to the top. Olgiati aspires, as Bachelard suggests, to provide a home for the states of the soul.

"Beauty is a value for our soul. And architecture is responsible for that"¹⁵.

1. Juhani Pallasmaa, "Identity, intimacy and domicile: Notes on the phenomenology of home", in *Encounters. Architectural Essays*, ed. Peter MacKeith (Helsinki: Rakennustieto, 2005).

2. M. Bielander, in Ursula Rieder, *Rudolf Olgiati. Bauen mit den Sinnen* (Chur: HTW-Chur Verlag, 2004), 149.

3. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de cultura económica, 2000). Bachelard published his essay in Paris in 1957.

4. Guido Olgiati described how his brother Rudolf, in their youth, forced him to exercise for 15 minutes and then shower every morning, something unusual at the time. He also points out that R. Olgiati always wore the same few pieces of clothing made from a single type of cotton or flannel, all in grey, white or blue.

5. Olgiati studied and graduated with Otto von Salvisberg, a remarkable professor who remained harshly sceptical of the emerging trends in modern architecture.

6. Sesame (Sesam in the original text) is used by Olgiati in referring to the idea of a cave, a serene refuge in the interior of the Earth, free of inclement weather. Thomas Boga, *Die Architektur von Rudolf Olgiati* (Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag, 2010), 17.

7. The *Föhn*, which can be translated as 'hair dryer', is a cursed warm wind among the inhabitants of the Alps. Caused by atmospheric effects, it constantly descends on the leeward side of the mountains, reaching temperatures of up to 30°C, and is said to have with serious consequences on those who frequently experience it, from migraines to psychosis.

8. R. Olgiati in Ursula Rieder, *Rudolf Olgiati. Bauen mit den Sinnen*, (Chur: HTW-Chur Verlag, 2004), 152.

9. *Rudolf Olgiati...* 2004.152.

10,11. *Rudolf Olgiati...* 2004. 152, 153.

12. *Rudolf Olgiati...* 2004. 160.

13. *Rudolf Olgiati...* 2004. 162.

14. Juhani Pallasmaa reflects on Bachelard's idea in his essay "Identity, intimacy and domicile: Notes on the phenomenology of home", in *Encounters. Architectural Essays*, ed. Peter MacKeith (Helsinki: Rakennustieto, 2005).

15. R. Olgiati in Ursula Rieder, *Rudolf Olgiati. Bauen mit den Sinnen*, (Chur: HTW-Chur Verlag, 2004), 163.

Rudolf Olgiati
Home
Senses
Composition elements
Universality