Foreword

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The pure artifact, which every work of modern architecture aspired to become, stands in opposition by its very essence to the natural realm, to what is not man-made. That is how the philosopher Theodor W. Adorno opens his reflections on natural beauty in modernity, compiled in his *Aesthetic Theory*, published posthumously in 1970. A meditation on natural beauty is fundamental to any aesthetic theory, Adorno points out, but great art and its interpretation shut the door anything that was once attributed to nature; they put aside any thought of what happens beyond their aesthetic immanence. And yet, those two poles, the natural and the fabricated, invoke one another: nature refers us to a mediated and objectified world, whereas the work of art calls up nature as it represents immediacy. In another passage from the same work, Adorno refers to the feeling of bad conscience that surfaces in the modern sensibility when faced with contemplating an old wall, a country house or, ultimately, a landscape. But nature appears as all-powerful only when there is no room for natural beauty, like in agricultural professions where nature is seen as an object of action. In those cases, Adorno concludes, natural beauty has no place.

One of the chinks exploited by the backlash against modernity beginning in the mid-20th century was precisely the recognition of the active role that nature could play in architectural works. Nature contributes to the built object the definition of a precise place, as well as the passage of time. Aldo van Eyck referred to this as the substitution of a generic space and time with a specific, concrete place and moment. That being said, reflections on nature had emerged in America long before the advent of modern architecture in Europe, with the figure of Frank Lloyd Wright and

his connection to 19th-century American intellectuals. Nature, for Wright, was above architecture, which must submit to it – if not by emulating its forms, then by building them from the inside out, like in any organic process. Henry David Thoreau, in his 1854 work *Walden*, even questioned the need for a house, since man is capable of living in nature by taking advantage of the elements that are present in the landscape.

Ricardo Devesa's book is presented as the individual study of five houses spanning a chronological range of almost a century, all built in Europe except one, which was built in America but by a European architect. The book's aim is to contrast a singular element, the tree, isolated from the landscape, with an architecture that is also singular, the detached house. Houses and trees, or trees and houses, contrast precisely because they are presupposed to be different, because of their diversity. The tree, the natural element, is identified with what exists before and will exist after the architecture, the construction of the house; it is an indisputable pre-existing element that conditions the design decisions, beyond the formal determinations of the designer. In addition, the tree provides a temporal dimension that is unlimited and cyclical, contrasting with the limited timespan of the architecture. In the houses studied by Ricardo Devesa, architecture appears in contrast to trees as an object that, once built, is devoid of evolution or movement; it even aims, in keeping with the goal of all modern architecture, to eschew the possibility of decay, aging or destruction.

Devesa writes of a necessary coexistence between tree and house, a coexistence based on the individuality of both elements. The focus, moreover, is never a generic tree or group of trees, but rather a cypress tree, a carob tree, an olive tree or a jacaranda. The more difficult and expensive the tree is to maintain during the process of building the house, the more it is appreciated for its special value or the difficulty involved in preserving it. Both Le Corbusier and Marcel Breuer emphasized the views of trees, including partial views, from the windows of their houses, treating

the trees as aesthetic objects, whereas Bernard Rudofsky made holes in the walls for the branches of the trees to pass through, creating the equivalent of a frame for a painting. The irregular geometries of the trunks or branches act as a counterpoint to the simplicity and volumetric regularity of the house's forms, which adapt to, but also make use of, the trees to construct special enclosures, sometimes outdoors.

Thornstein Veblen, in his work *The Theory of the Leisure Class* from 1899, refers to the fact that the aesthetic condition of an object is mediated by its rarity and the difficulty of obtaining or maintaining it. Everyday objects, but also flowers and trees or shrubs, are appreciated all the more when they are rare, or when they offer a special beauty to a place and, consequently, a certain distinction to the people who possess them. In the cases examined in this book, we might also say that the natural elements lend a certain rarity and aesthetic value to the architecture with which they coexist, either because of their consideration as aesthetic objects, as in the case of Le Corbusier or Breuer, or as indicators of an intended ruralism or vernacular quality superimposed onto the artificiality of modern architecture, as in the case of Rudofsky, the Smithsons or Navarro Baldeweg. In the first group, the role of trees is restricted to mere visual enjoyment, and they are identified with architectural elements like pillars; the second group takes into account the trees' more utilitarian role as climatic conditioners, providing shade and protection.

The architecture's delegation of a distinctive character onto the natural elements that accompany it is far removed from the theses of modernity, which claimed a universality and formal neutrality that stood in opposition to the search for any particular character. That was, however, the aim of English and American landscape designers and architects of the 19th century, who pursued a perfect coexistence between house and landscape, especially the contiguous landscape, and they placed a value on artificial, man-made landscapes over and above pristine nature. In the examples presented by Ricardo Devesa, the rational en-

joyment of the forms of modern architecture gives way to a more sensitive attitude towards the indeliberateness of forms and the passage of time inherent in natural elements. The presence and even prominence of the trees in these houses invites a more relaxed and contemplative attitude in their inhabitants, beyond the mere utilitarianism of their spaces and forms.

The almost monographic treatment of each example, without interferences between them, presuming that the conclusions will provide a certain degree of generality, warrants some consideration. In the first place, the selected works were all designed by architects who offered their own reflections on the subject of trees or vegetation, whether pre-existing or planted subsequently. In that sense, the study of each of the houses is mediated by the explicit objectives of their designers. Second, Ricardo Devesa focuses above all on the process, the design and construction of the architecture, whatever its duration, in which trees condition the development of the built forms, sidestepping the role that the trees may play in the eventual transformations of the house or its aging. The tree, here, is a static element, although its organic condition is sometimes evident in the seasonal changes it undergoes throughout the year.

Without observing a chronological order, La Casa in Frigiliana by Bernard Rudofsky, from the early 1970s, kicks off the book, an example of "architecture without architects", followed by two emblematic examples of modern architecture: Marcel Breuer's Caesar Cottage from the early 1950s and Le Corbusier's Villa La Roche from the 1920s. A purist villa by Le Corbusier, in which the architect defends paying special attention to trees, follows the study of a Breuer house that represents a certain formal weakening of modern architecture, making room for new elements like patios or porches. The only example by a Spanish architect, Villa Pepa, built by Juan Navarro Baldeweg in Alicante in the 1990s, introduces a personal discourse by this architect/artist, which draws on the activation of sensory stimuli that natural elements can also awaken in the inhabitant or the observer of the

architecture. And finally, the Hexenhaus, built in Germany by the British architects Alison and Peter Smithson, features the longest construction period of all the cases, from 1986 and 2001, and the incorporation of many of the surrounding trees as well as architectural elements like pavilions, bridges or exterior stairways.

A more exhaustive discourse on houses and trees would have required a broader catalogue of cases and would also have obliged establishing relationships between the different examples and perhaps even the formulation of a taxonomy. That was Ricardo Devesa's aim in the second part of his doctoral dissertation, which is not included this book. By offering the reader only the five examples, without a chronological or geographical order, and each one discussed in depth, Devesa delegates to the reader the possibility of discovering possible commonalities between them or, on the contrary, maintaining them as separate universes, each with its own specific conclusions. There is a concerted effort in the book to balance the five discourses while, at the same time, avoiding forcing an eventual confluence between them. Ricardo Devesa adds the idea of outdoor domesticity to the title, which implies giving trees a role beyond their simple dialectical presence as a natural element. Trees construct an exterior for each of the dwellings, a context that conditions the critical reading of these works of modern architecture, now activated by the presence of nature. In all of them, including Le Corbusier's villa, we find instances of breaking up the box, the compactness of the built volumes, which are forced to disperse to accommodate the natural elements. The interconnection between volume and space, which was one of the objectives of many of the artistic avant-gardes of the 20th century, gives rise here to a new concept of habitation that is less universal, but more free. These unique homes built by European architects throughout the 20th century certainly resonate with some examples of American organic architecture, in which the coexistence of architecture and nature occurs seemingly without friction. But if we look at them carefully, we discover how much the formal self-absorption of

modern architecture has conditioned them, each in a different way, into an uneasy dialectic with the natural realm. The trees that can be seen through windows, that cross through a hole in a wall, that climb the walls of a patio or drop leaves onto a glass roof, in all cases they undergo a kind of metamorphosis, a process of estrangement, that is necessary to coexist with an architecture that can never fully merge with them.