

Open City

by Alastair R. Noble

I recently spent a month as a guest at Ciudad Aberita, Cooperativa Amereida, Ritoque, Chile, or Open City. This site of sand dunes and scrub hosts residential homes, a chapel, a cemetery, a sanctuary, an amphitheater, a music room, a foundation for a library, student workshops, and even a sports field. And yet Open City is not a city. It is not even a village. In fact, it isn't exactly a place—it's a way of life that could be described as an ongoing art performance or poetic act within a continuously changing environment. Its residents have undertaken serious experiments in architectural, engineering, educational, and social practice for over 30 years. The community is organized and financed by a close group of professors at the School of Architecture and Design, Catholic University of Valparaíso, their families, and students. Open City does not claim to be a utopian society, just a laboratory for poetry, architecture, sculpture, visual art, education, and living.

Left: Hospedería del Errante, 1981, concrete and steel. Right: Hospedería de la Entrada, 1982, wood.

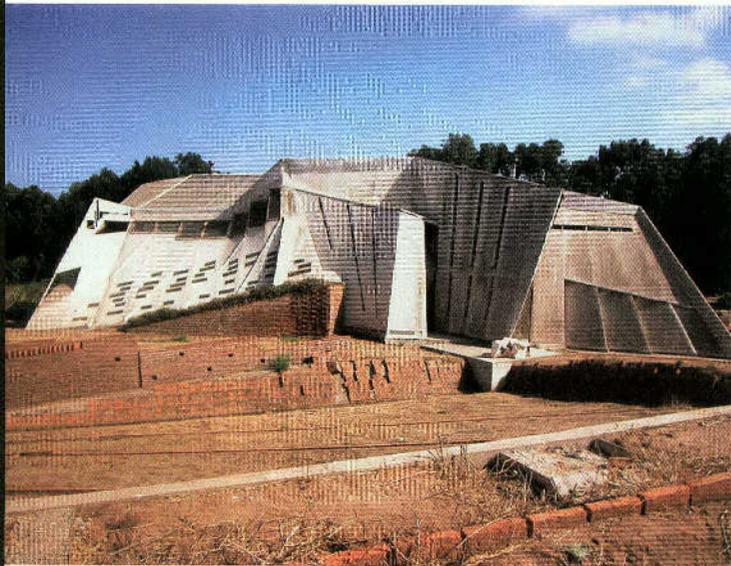
Open City is situated on approximately 750 acres along the Pacific coast of Chile, about 30 kilometers north of Valparaíso. Half the land consists of scrub and sand dunes running parallel with the ocean and terminating at a river estuary and bird sanctuary. The other half rises up a steep incline and flattens to farmland. These upper reaches afford a panoramic view across the landscape, which is dotted with mysterious architectural structures and painted metal sculptures that project upward like fingers. More buildings and sculptural forms rise from the hillside, some of brick and concrete and others of wood.

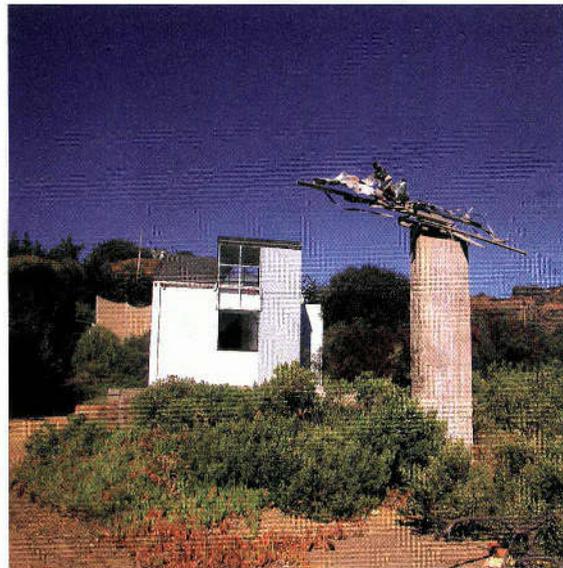
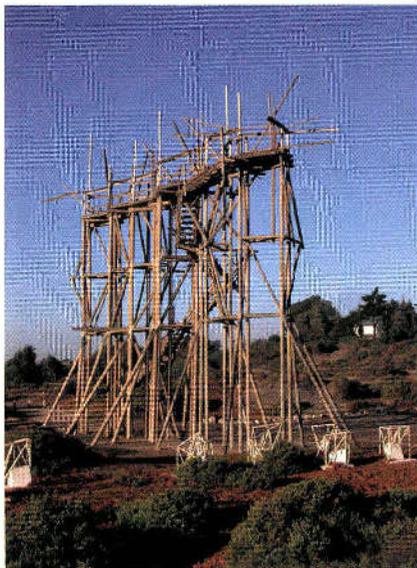
The buildings are experiments in manipulating space and structure in this challenging environment: light, sound, wind, and sand are all embraced within a poetic vision. Many of the structures have been inhabited for over 30 years, and yet few of them have ever been fully completed. They are strange assemblages, pieced together over the years as recycled materials were claimed from local demolition sites. Each building has a unique configuration, sometimes spliced or breached

due to a sudden change of materials or terrain. These ruptures become significant aspects of the design.

Open City's full name includes "Amereida," which provides a key to the methodology of its residents. "Amereida" (1965) is an epic poem by the Argentinean poet Godofredo Iommi that records his expedition that year with the Chilean architect Alberto Cruz and the Argentinean sculptor Claudio Girola, all founders of the School of Architecture and Design. Their voyage of discovery crossed the South American continent in pursuit of what Iommi called "the interior sea of the Latin American Continent." This type of journey later became known as a *travesía*, a search for a Latin American identity. Many poetic acts were performed en route, including readings and rituals; sometimes temporary markings were inscribed in the ground or structures fabricated from found materials.

Poetry, specifically the "Amereida," is paramount to the operation of Open City and the teaching credo at the School of Architecture and Design. "Amereida" connects the word "America" to the "Eneida" ("Aeneid"), Virgil's epic account of the wandering Aeneas and the founding of Rome. Iommi's poem can also be traced to the Surrealist poets and their inspirational sources such as Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Poe, and Mallarmé. For these





writers, a poem is a privileged moment: words reveal new meaning in each new context, and metaphors are transmutations.

The first building at Open City was not a residence but a performance room known as the Sala de Musica (1972). In addition to musical events, theatrical productions, and poetic performances, it serves as the City's primary gathering place. Collectively designed by Open City members and their students, the Sala is located in a low-lying hollow in the dunes, at the center of the property. The exterior defies convention: the wooden siding is set on a diagonal, and there appear to be no windows, only a few slots on the corners. Instead of a grand entrance, each corner provides access to the space through a modest passageway. These thresholds reveal an extraordinary sight at the center of the building—a shaft of bright light illuminating the interior. This light comes from a column made of stacked sash windows that open and close to the outdoors. Water pours down the shaft when it rains and exits through a drainage grid in the floor. Moveable panels of reed matting form the interior walls and act as baffles during concerts. The Sala de Musica takes basic elements of the local vernacular—a raised ceiling with a skylight supported by wooden columns—and poetically reconfigures them into a space-penetrating form.

The Hospederia de la Entrada, a residence built in 1982, was designed as a gatehouse. The eccentric wooden structure is supported on stilts and can be entered through three stairwells, but the main doorway is reached by a series of staggered brick steps that rise gently up the sand toward a flight of wooden stairs. The structure consists of five modules, each capped with a tooth-like roof of transparent fiberglass. The rear module and roof remain open and skeletal. The repeated roofline resembles a serrated blade or waves crashing over the beach. The four solid modules are sided with tongue-in-groove planks set at an angle that mirrors the roof-line. A wide horizontal band of windows mounted on vertical columns wraps around the front of the building, providing an unobstructed view of the ocean. The siding and windows at the back begin to break apart, terminating in the unfinished structure. The progression again suggests the motion of waves. The nautical theme is echoed in the interior with wood-paneled walls, a narrow galley kitchen and bathroom, and a stairwell that descends from the center of the building to the lower level outside. This is all reminiscent of a boat under construction in dry-dock. The resident architect, with the assistance of his students and many others, has also built a sea-faring ship that serves as a floating annex to the School of Architecture and Design.

Left to right: Torres de Agua, 1974, wood and steel pylons. Sala de Musica, 1972, wood and glass. Hospederia del Estudio (Cubiculo), 1987, wood.

Past this "gatehouse" is the small white Hospederia del Estudio (Cubiculo) (1987). This modest building is mounted on a brick foundation that extends into a terrace. The area terminates with a narrow concrete column, which supports a sculpture of twisted aluminum wires and rods that echoes the ever-cresting waves of the ocean and the jagged roof of the Hospederia de la Entrada. Sometimes called the "poet's house," this house was built for founding poet Godofredo Iommi, who used it for overnight visits.

The first residence to be built, the Doble Hospederia: Hospederia de las Maquinas y Hospederia el Banquete (1974), was initially designed to house two poets. In this community, poetry—not architecture—is of prime importance, hence the necessity to create on-site residences for poets. Built after a poetic act, like all of the City's structures, the Doble Hospederia commemorates a large banquet in which tables were set up across the site. As the story goes, excavation for the building began when the diners started to kick away the sand beneath the tables.

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