

The three houses (2010)

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My three uncles from Toledo, Baltasar, Mariano and Paco, bought three plots of land to build their three houses for the summer holidays, and used the same building contractor. I did not hear any more about it until they were finished, and the formal moment arrived to go to Toledo and see them.

Baltasar's two-storey house in Cedillo del Condado, an arid little village north of Toledo, did not seem from a distance to be anything out of the ordinary. Of the three, this was the only one that had been designed by an architect. I was about twelve, and of normal height, but even so, as we approached, I had the feeling that the front door on the ground floor was very small. And so it was: I had to stoop to enter. Inside was a large hall, a kitchen, three bedrooms, a living room with a fireplace, a storeroom and a bathroom. A normal layout. But there was something disturbing about it, which my childish timidity prevented me from mentioning, something that none of the grown-ups seemed to care about. The ceiling was very low, so much so that in some places I had to walk carefully so as not to bump my head. Even my parents and my uncles, who moved around the rooms with ease, had to stoop to go from one room to another. The lintels of the doors were lower. Even so, the only one who seemed a bit surprised was my father, who was taller than the others.

At that time I did not yet hit the ceiling. But as the years passed, that floor of the house gradually got too small for me, smaller and smaller. The time came when I had to hunch my shoulders in order to stand up. I can recall the exact distance from floor to ceiling by a very simple formula: it was the same height as my shoulder. I could remain standing by leaning my head forwards and pressing the back of my neck and my shoulders against the ceiling. In that extraordinary house, my head was surplus to requirements. True to form, my uncles never mentioned the fact that they had to dodge the lights while walking around. One day, as I left the living room, stooping appropriately, I heard my aunt say to my mother in a very worried voice: "Paula, that boy's getting a hump."

The upper floor was very different. It was about four metres high.

This vast scale was not an experimental excess on the architect's part. The key to the mystery was the builder, who was used to building without plans and was apparently incapable of understanding them. Ground plans, elevations and cross sections were all Greek to him. So he built a wall where my uncle told him he wanted a wall, and he put a window where my uncle asked him for a window. At one point he suggested to him that since there was going to be an upper floor, it was not a good idea to make the lower one very high. The builder stood my uncle against the wall, measured his height, added a few inches, and marked it. And so, being convinced that there couldn't be anyone taller than him, venerated as he was in the family like a household god, my uncle Baltasar, who was about five feet five inches tall, asked the builder to put the ceiling at the height of the mark.

They made the upper floor twice as high on account of a typical Toledan reaction: to compensate.

We immediately went on to Lominchar, another little village in the area ten minutes away by car, along a dusty road, to see my other two uncles' houses. Bearing in mind that the same builder had put them up, I was rubbing my hands with glee at the prospect of further marvels.

My uncle Mariano's house, which only had one floor, was very large and square. The front door opened onto a long corridor with several rooms off it, all of them bedrooms. The corridor turned to the right, and further on there were more bedrooms. Right again, and yet more bedrooms. It was rather like a hotel: corridors with doors leading to very similar rooms, with two beds, a bedside table, a wardrobe... The corridor, which grew shorter with each turn, ended at a door that led to a bathroom. The house had been built in a shape similar to a spiral, laid out like a labyrinth of rooms with a bathroom at the centre. With no kitchen or sitting room, which were not necessary, according to Mariano. With great pride my uncle kept repeating that there were a lot of people in the family, and like this they could all come and visit at the same time. It was very difficult to imagine the real ground plan of the house, which seemed to me to contain a tremendous telluric mystery.

My uncle encouraged me to bathe in the swimming pool. I went up to take a look and saw that there were only a few inches of water in it, which didn't even come close to reaching the steps. My uncle urged me again and again to dive off the board. I told him very seriously, overcoming my timidity this time for reasons of survival, that I preferred to wait until the swimming pool was filled, because I might fracture my skull if I dived in. But he, very surprised at this, assured me that there were thousands of millions of tons of water in it. The swimming pool was well over half full, but it was so deep that they had not managed to fill it any more than that. So it looked as though it was almost empty, and you had to fall several metres to reach the surface. Maybe I wouldn't have fractured my skull on the bottom, but I would certainly never have been able to get out of that well. My uncle Mariano explained to me that as there were a lot of people in the family they needed a big swimming pool. And that he had decided to make it very deep, instead of very long, to save space.

The third house, my uncle Paco's, was very conventional; there really wasn't anything special about it, either outside or inside. I felt a bit disappointed and surprised that everything was so normal, in view of the precedents. My uncle came up and asked me, with a smiling expression that revealed his hidden intentions, whether I liked the table in the lounge. I replied that I did, and with great pride and satisfaction he told me that he had made it himself. He also asked me whether I liked the chairs, I answered him that they looked wonderful to me, and he smiled again and told me that he had built them as well. And so he went round the items in the house one by one, the rest of the furniture, the sinks, the cutlery, the plates... he had made them all. He had even baked all the bricks for the house, and had bought a manual in weekly instalments that included with each issue a part for a television set, which he had built and got working. Curtains, tiles, bars for the windows, the chimney, everything had been made by him. And then he personally supervised the workers, telling them where every little item needed to go, until he achieved a perfect result. This, which I later took to be an exercise in alchemy, like a magician making all his magic equipment himself, seemed fascinating to me. My uncle Paco had the reputation of being a dreamer and of telling extraordinary stories, but I believed him. All this time I have believed that my uncle really did build everything with his own hands; why not?

There is something more, something very important. My uncle Paco asked me whether I had seen the scarecrow he had made. I hurried out, but he stopped me. Before I saw it, he wanted to tell me that the scarecrow was an identical reproduction of himself, down to the smallest detail. And he added, very happily, that the reproduction was so perfect and so realistic that his wife had mistaken them for each other several times, and his brother had been speaking to it for a while before he noticed that it was not the real one.

I returned many, many times to these three houses. My uncles passed away, and now they have been sold or are standing empty. These houses, in which the scenes of many of my pictures are set, have been a very important source of inspiration to me. More than many museums, artists and books that keep going over and over something I had within my grasp: conceptual architecture for daily use, a true living museum.

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