



‘Distance gives you perspective’

Sebastián Adamo and Marcelo Faiden aim for an architecture that is rooted in society while also producing friction.

Text

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Photos

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↑ Brown panelling was used to clad the exterior walls of Saenz House, and all glass is tinted brown as well.

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With its low houses, small shops and calm streets, Nuñez is a typical Buenos Aires neighbourhood. Its buildings reflect a particular blend of past and present – in Nuñez, vintage car-repair shops live together with carefully designed houses, many belonging to the young architects who have made their home here. It's also an area halfway between the gated communities to the north, which have grown exponentially in recent decades, and the traditional city centre, where hundreds of thousands of people work. Nuñez is also where Sebastián Adamo and Marcelo Faiden established their office and where we meet to talk about their work, which is influenced by the ambiguous ambience of the firm's location. Their architecture is fraught with complex situations that are a source of deliberately generated 'friction'.

How did the two of you meet?

MARCELO FAIDEN: We met at the University of Buenos Aires, where we worked together in the same group – right from the beginning. Later, after winning a competition for students in 2002, we went together to Spain to do our PhDs. That was a time when things in Argentina were not so good. It was an ideal moment to leave, to gain perspective and to see Buenos Aires from a different point of view.

SEBASTIÁN ADAMO: We had shared interests. We earned our doctoral degrees in Barcelona – Helio Piñon was our professor – but we wanted to work in Madrid. Plans for our stay in Spain revolved around both cities.

FAIDEN: Things in that country were at a boil. Spanish architecture was flourishing. The academic and professional worlds were closely linked and feeding off each other. The kind of architectural office that we were interested in – the model we wanted to take back to Argentina – was in Madrid. It combined intellectual speculation and material production.

Can you elaborate?

FAIDEN: Our examples were studios with a strong penetration into society. We were not interested, nor are we interested today, in a work environment based on a world of exceptions. We were not at all fascinated by projects with exorbitant budgets or by projects that were just a one-shot deal. We did not go to Europe to find exquisite projects that were well designed

and well financed. The studios we liked were rooted in society. They made architecture that was contemporary and pertinent. Think of Mansilla + Tuñón, Urzáiz y Pérez Plá, Federico Soriano, and Eduardo Arroyo.

ADAMO: We also met younger people who were just entering the profession, as we were. Being in contact with two generations of Spanish architects gave us a better idea of the type of studio we wanted to develop – the idea of opening our own practice prompted our decision to return to Argentina, where there was so much work to be done.

FAIDEN: Distance gives you perspective. Viewing Buenos Aires from Madrid, we saw Argentina's capital as a good environment in which to work. Had we not spent that time in Spain, we may not have felt the same way. On the other hand, in Madrid we had become part of a fairly stable system that was thriving thanks to exhibitions, competitions and publications. And the risk of that kind of closed systems is to repeat themselves. A similar network did not exist in Buenos Aires, and the city certainly had major problems that needed to be solved.

What have you been doing in Buenos Aires?

ADAMO: What's most important is that we have avoided falling into the trap of specialization. We don't want to become 'museum architects' or 'social-housing architects' or 'public-space architects'. We cherish diversity, because the value of architecture does not lie in the perfection of a speciality but →

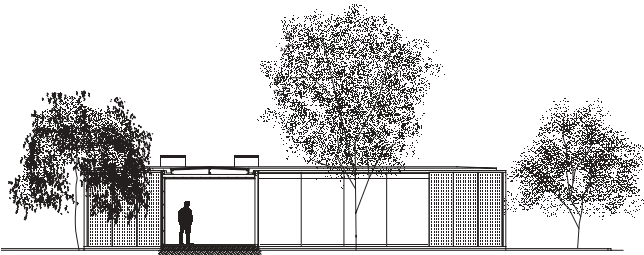


Saenz House

La Plata | Argentina | 2013

Built for an elderly couple, Saenz House consists of three intersecting volumes, each of which is 4 m wide. Large windows visually extend the interior spaces to include the surrounding gardens. A lack of hierarchy in the interior invites occupants to spend time in any number of places, depending on mood, time of day, or season of the year.

Cross Section

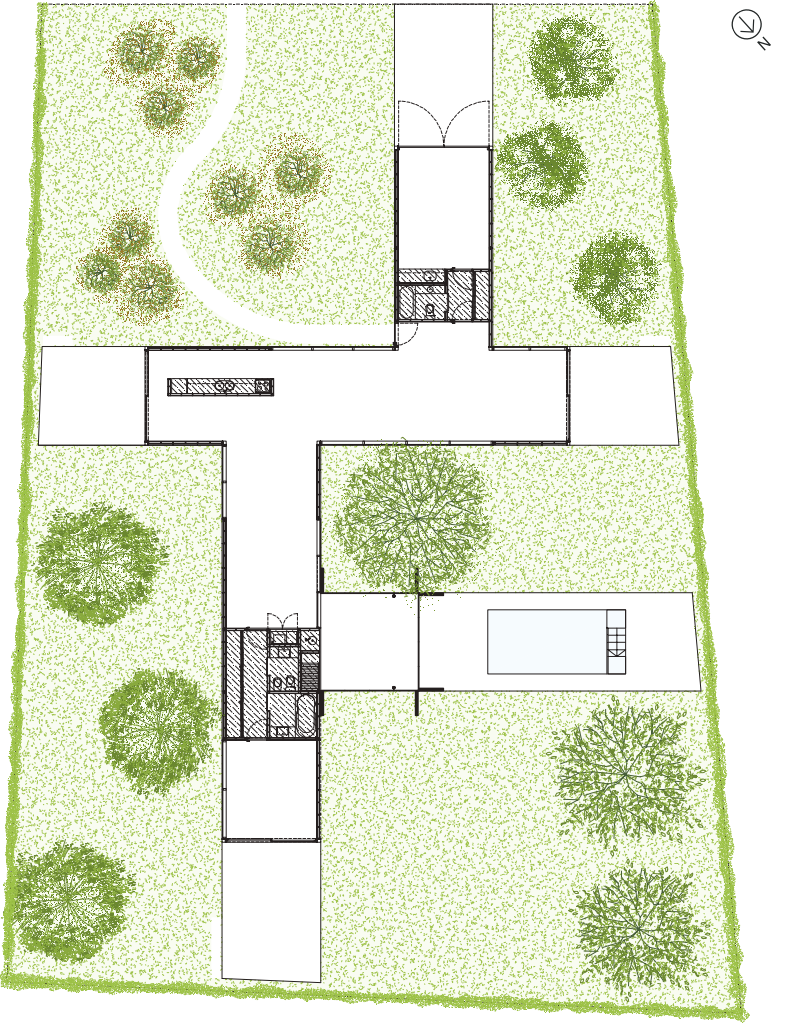


‘We don’t want to become museum architects’

← On the side that faces the street, Saenz House appears to be shielded from its surroundings.

↓ Saenz House has a spacious 182-m² interior.

Plan





Martos House
Buenos Aires | Argentina | 2012

Located in Villa Adelina, a suburban neighbourhood on the north side of Buenos Aires, Martos House is part of a multifunctional mix of commerce, industry and housing. The house shares a party wall with a 10-m-high industrial building and opens towards an adjacent garden. To the rear is a prefabricated house built at an earlier date.

← in just the opposite. The distance we've created between our work and specificity gives us the freedom to look at projects without imposing restrictions on the possibilities.

FAIDEN: And it allows us to continue producing. Studios specializing exclusively in property development, for example, quickly went out of business when the currency crisis hit this country. We want to develop projects that correspond to concrete demands. When we started giving conferences abroad in 2009, we didn't talk about social context, site-specific characteristics, or the bureaucratic and financial preconditions that affected our projects. We focused strictly on design issues – we didn't think other aspects were relevant to the architecture itself. After talking with our colleagues, though, we came to understand how important they are.

When you visit Europe now, do you feel that you represent Argentina?

ADAMO: It's easy to give into the temptation to wrap yourself in the national flag in order to open doors to certain discussion forums – even more so when you take into account the current revalidation of Latin America. But we find this attitude somewhat anachronistic. It prevents us from understanding the world in which we live. We believe that blurring sociopolitical borders can open a dialogue. You can apply the same idea to

blurring the limits of time and to getting rid of all the labels that pop up when we observe other historical periods.

Your buildings have very particular characteristics – they are like UFOs that have landed in the traditional neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires – and yet they work very well within their surroundings.

ADAMO: Yes, that is an ambiguity we're after. We're fond of the architecture of 40 years ago, but only insofar as it can be transformed into something contemporary. We want to open a dialogue with the existing identity of a neighbourhood. We're always out to create friction between the building and its surroundings, between the building and other buildings, between the building and the culture.

FAIDEN: A building should be capable of offering a new perspective on the environment in which it is placed. That's something that Richard Rorty called 'redescription'. It's a term we like to use.

Did you create friction in your design of the Saenz House? What about the Martos House?

ADAMO: The Saenz House is in a gated community on the south side of Buenos Aires. We like to think of this house as a direct continuation of an environment based almost exclusively on property lines that subdivide the community into homogene-

ous plots. Saenz House dissects one of these plots. The house itself is the defining element of a delineated area, which is now habitable. Thus the focus shifts to the land that delineates the house, which features five patios with different types of vegetation that's been used to protect, to hide or to reveal the multi-winged house.

FAIDEN: Martos House, on the contrary, is in a less 'explicit' environment. Villa Adelina – a neighbourhood on the north side of the city – is a mix of small industry, shops and houses. We tried to capture the coexistence of these functions in a house that not only follows the verticality of the party wall that separates it from the adjacent dwelling, but also opens towards a large garden on the opposite side. Martos House synthesizes the heterogeneity of the neighbourhood and projects a high degree of autonomy, despite the limitations involved in its design. We actually inserted a new 'corner' halfway down the block, making it difficult for passers-by to determine the chronological order of the two houses. Which was built first and which came later? Exactly the kind of dialogue we like to provoke. ←

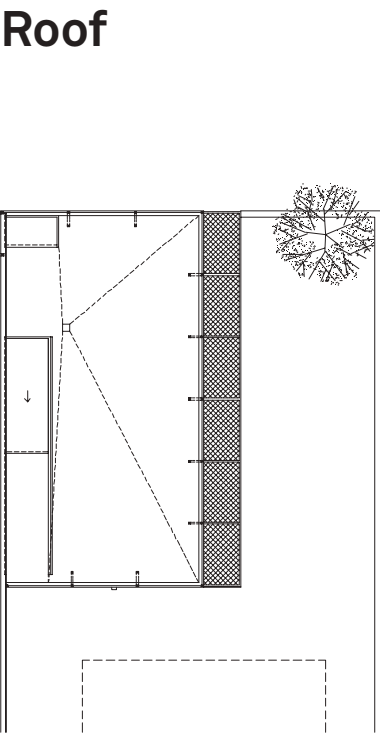
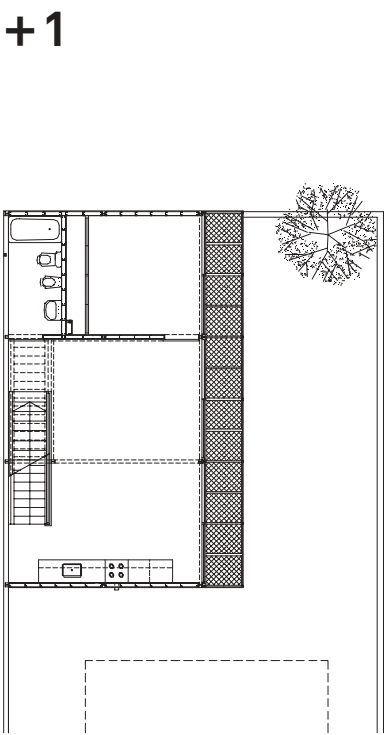
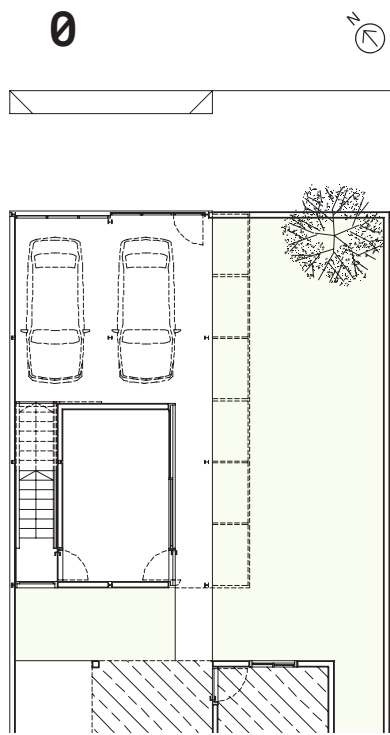
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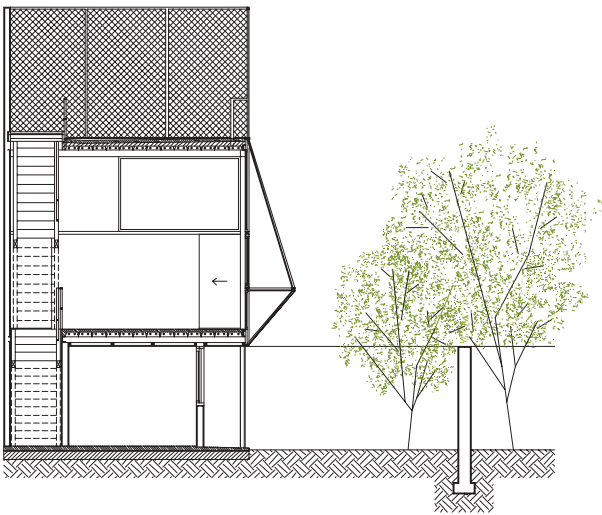
→ Seen from the living room, potted plants on a wire-mesh 'shelf' that runs the length of one side of the house seem to merge with greenery in the garden.

← Martos House shares a party wall with a prefabricated house built at an earlier date.

'We're always out to create friction between a building and its surroundings'



Cross Section



Long Section

