

Unless you were very rich or very poor, my generation in Barcelona grew up surrounded by a very specific and limited number of design objects. Since Spain was a relatively poor country, design wasn't really imported and sold until more recently. But in the '60s and '70s a few crazy young guys started companies to produce and sell their own designs. One of those projects was BD, founded by Tusquets and other friends in the mid '70s. Thanks to them we got things like the Gaulino chair and other objects such as the Sotssass cock vase. He was also famous as he had started an important publishing house under his name, with his ex-wife. One that was publishing Kundera and Beckett and Murakami.

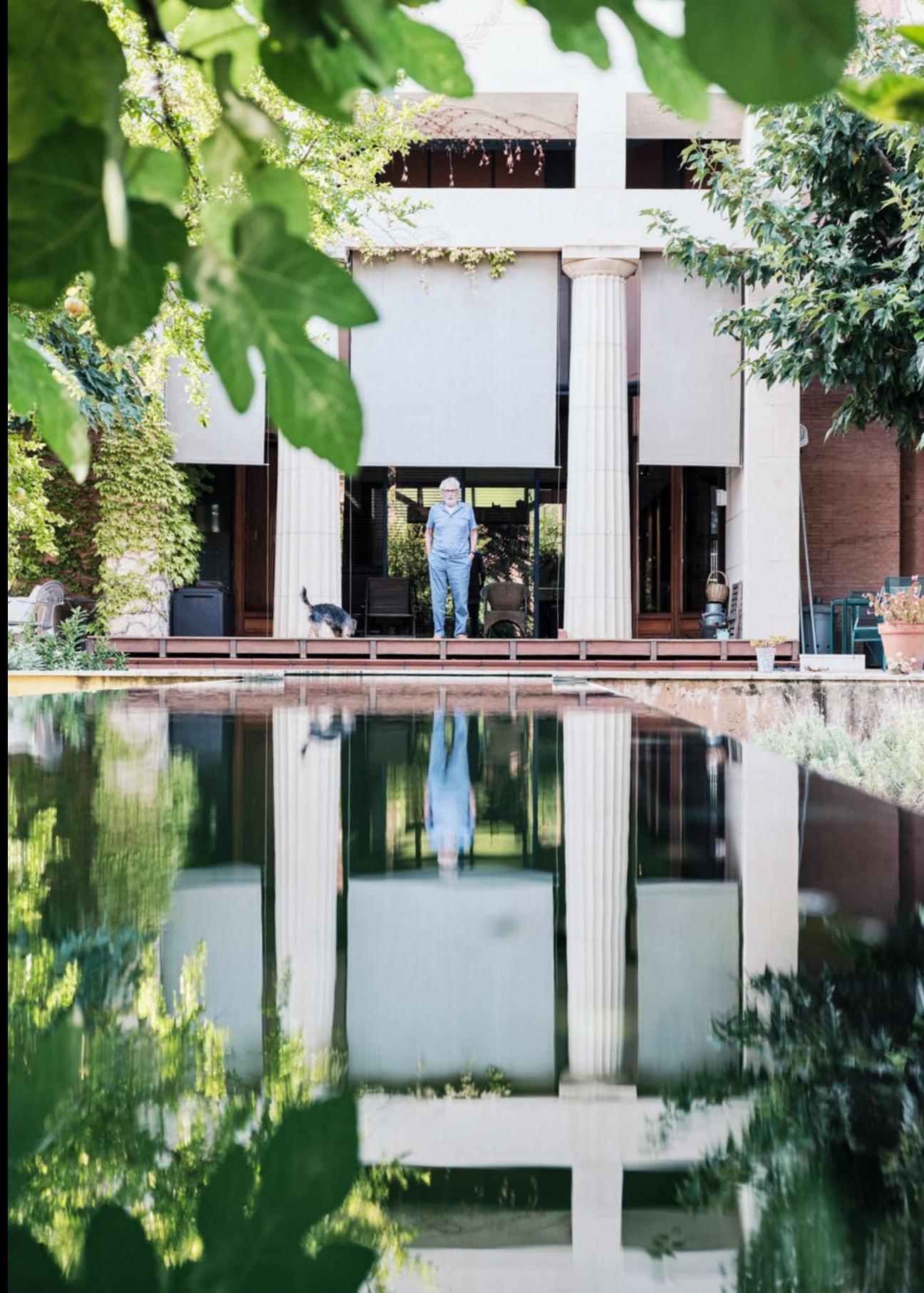
But I really got into Tusquets as an adult, through his architectural work with Estudio PER in the '60s and '70s. Although super influential, they were a very young studio and it translated into their work, which sat between rationalism, pop culture, and postmodernism. Later, I discovered his painting; generally small oil paintings of women with a strong erotic charge. Later still, while on holidays, I discovered

OSCAR TUSQUETS

INTERVIEW BY GUILLERMO SANTOMÀ
PHOTOGRAPHY BY NACHO ALEGRE

that he was also a writer. My friends were enthusiastically reading one of his books, and at first I wasn't interested: I thought it was impossible for someone who drew, painted, and designed so well to also write well. As those vacations started to become long, I finally picked up the book and really fell for it. Of everything Tusquets does, maybe his writing is what I ended up enjoying the most.

He's not a fiction writer; he writes of the stories he's lived and of his thoughts on design and art and love. When I met him personally and we became friends, it made me extremely happy the day I realised I could hijack all those anecdotes. Now, late at night, or whenever the occasion fits, I can say 'I have a friend who...' In the end I've learned many of these stories by heart. When we thought about interviewing him, I realised it was better that I didn't do it myself. I think it's better, for such a vast character, to approach him from scratch. Guillermo, with so many things in common, didn't know him personally, so we got them together to do this interview.





How did you meet Dalí?

Every summer Federico Correa held a crazy party in Cadaqués. The party was on 18 July because it was his birthday and also the anniversary of the national uprising that kicked off the Spanish Civil War, and he found this highly provocative. One year he invited Salvador Dalí. At that time I was quite anti-Dalí, because I was left-wing and all left-wingers were anti-Dalí. Salvador came along with Amanda Lear, very punctual, and when he was introduced to us he said, 'I'm very interested in what you're doing', as I had done one and a half houses in Cadaqués. And I said, 'Well, thanks very much', to which he replied, 'Would you like to come to my house in Portlligat tomorrow at around seven in the afternoon?' I said yes and went with Beatriz de Moura, who was my wife at the time.

What year was this?

I was 20 or 25, so it must have been around 1965. We left after two hours, totally convinced that he was the most amusing, most intelligent and most creative person we'd ever met. I think he was interested in me for two reasons: because I was young and rather good-looking and because I was an architect. He loved architecture. Just as he hated music, which he said was an art for the lower parts, the intestines, whereas architecture is an intellectual art. We could have conversations that Salvador normally couldn't have, because 80 percent of the people he surrounded himself with were social climbers and didn't know anything. It was a long friendship of 10 years, but 10 intense years, the entire '70s, when he was still very fit.

How did this special relationship continue?

We met in Barcelona, we met in Portlligat, we met at Christmas in Paris, at the Ritz, and we met at Easter at the St Regis in New York. I learned everything with Salvador Dalí, but he confirmed one thing for me, which is that one shouldn't have a second home in life. You should have one home only, like he did, with his fisherman's cottage in Portlligat, and then go to good hotels. One day at the Ritz they



Above: Salvador Dalí and Oscar Tusquets with the *Salvisofá*, 1974. Below: *Mae West Room*, Teatro Museo Dalí, Figueres, 1975.

brought a white horse to the suite and it crapped on the Pierre Frey carpet and Salvador said, 'Well, let's go have dinner, they'll clear it up'. The other thing is that you must speak languages relatively badly; secretaries have to speak them perfectly, but not creators. He made spelling mistakes in all languages and mixed one language with another, and he was fantastic speaking English.

Let's go back. How did it all start? Well, I finished my degree and created Estudio PER with three friends: Lluís Clotet, Pep Bonet, and Cristian Cirici. From the outset we said we'd work on independent projects, although we had the same draughtsman, a secretary, and a telephone. Lluís and I worked in close partnership, in architecture and also in design, for 20 years. Up until the '70s, we did practically everything together and we continue to be very good friends.

How did the writing start?

My father bought a Christian publishing house from the Lumen family, and my sister, who was a known writer, took it on, while Lluís and I started doing the graphics part. We also did the odd publishing partnership—the 'Word and Image' collection, for example, with the greatest Spanish photographers and writers, some of them Nobel Prize winners, which has become a cult thing. We didn't sell much at the time, but now it's become a gem. And that was it with Lluís, as I only did a couple more things for Lumen. Then Beatriz de Moura started working at Lumen too, and there was a dispute between my sister and Beatriz. So we decided to set up a publisher on our own, Beatriz and I, which we called Tusquets, which has just celebrated its 40th birthday.

And were you already writing then?

At the time I found writing very difficult; doing a report on a project was an uphill struggle. This changed many years later when I wrote a text about shade; I showed it to Beatriz and she said, 'Right, we'll publish this for you'. Then I got enthusiastic. The book was a great

success, and so I slowly started writing more. I say that I write to win friends. The other day in the chemist's a man said, 'Are you Tusquets?' My son was amazed. But I'm always being told, 'I've read your books', never 'I've seen your paintings'. People aren't talking to me about my architecture. I've always wanted to write fiction but have never made the jump; they're always about art, daily life, design.

And when did you start designing?

We were always closely connected to the Milan architects, and in Italy nearly all designers, like Magistretti and Sottsass, are architects. We started to design furniture in Federico Correa's studio for a specific project. We were doing a restaurant and made the chairs. At the time that was viable, but it wasn't industrial design per se. Afterwards with Polinax, a company owned by Leopoldo Milà, we did a few things, but since nobody else was interested, we were crazy enough to say to ourselves, 'Let's set up our own company and do our own designs'. We set up a company that at the start was called Bocaccio Design, but later we changed the name to BD Ediciones de Diseño.

As we were friends with Sottsass and Gregotti and the like, we started to produce some designs by big foreign designers, especially the Italians. Then Alessandro Mendini recommended me for the design of a tea service for Alessi. From there, the market opened up a bit for me. I started to design for other big companies. And then I did my first chair, called Varius. It was such a total best-seller that I had the problem actors have: everybody came to me to order a chair. I wanted to make TV sets, hearing aids, but everyone came to me to order a chair.

I really like this idea you had of working with Dalí's images, turning them into objects. Could you tell me a bit about how it started?



A selection of product designs by Oscar Tusquets. From top to bottom: Metalástica, 1987; Gaulino, 1987; Carrello trolley, 1988.

The first object with Dalí was the sofa in the shape of lips, which I made with him when we were doing the Mae West Lounge in the Dalí Museum. One day I said to him, 'Listen, I saw one of your pictures in Chicago, which is Mae West's face in the form of a lounge. And we were able to do a lounge that, viewed from a point, reproduced the painting, which reproduces a lounge'. And he said, 'Great idea, we've just bought the fishmongers that used to be next to the theatre, it would fit in there. Do me a perspective study'. I made him a fully staged, geometrically constructed perspective study, then one day I went excitedly to show it to him. He was with some lovely models and he said to me in Catalan, 'I'm totally confident; it'll be fantastic'.

So what does the Gaulino chair represent?

When I designed the Gaulino, it was the first mass-produced wooden chair I had done, and when I saw what the machines could do, that they could make a Louis XVI leg, I decided to make the most of it and make a chair whose cross-section could be continuously changed, something that couldn't be done with metal tubing. When I finished it I thought, 'Does it look like it's been done by Gaudí or Mollino? Well, as the people will decide, I'll

call it Gaulino'. But when I was making it a lot of people also said, 'The influence of Dalí is very evident in this chair'.

And when did you start painting more intensively?

I left painting behind almost completely, and after a few years I reconnected and started painting again, but as a form of psychological therapy; the truth is that I was only painting on the weekends, so I did four paintings a year. In 2008 I had a sharp drop in architecture and design orders. For a year I was trying to encourage customers, 'Look, I've got this'. I think that was a very bad idea; I think the customer





has to be in love with you and has to go after you, otherwise you lose all your authority. So, in order not to be watching *Perry Mason* on TV all day, or one of those modern series, I said, 'Well, I'm going to paint more'. Since then I really have been painting every day. I've exhibited several times, I've been selling relatively well, and I'm having a very good time. Just recently, I've spent a year painting architecture, all pictures of the same size, 116cm high, and I like architecture, especially Greek, Roman, and neoclassical architecture.

Painting it live?

No, they are all from my own photos. They are my photos, because when I take them I

an article on Benidorm. The publisher said, 'Oscar, after saying something so sophisticated and cultured about the house of Curzio Malaparte, you come out with this thing on Benidorm'. To me I find it beautiful, and people don't get that at all. There doesn't seem to be any contradiction, to me. There are two or three things that people, the intelligentsia, haven't forgiven me for: one is Benidorm and the other is the Sagrada Familia. There's an article that came out in *El País* a few years ago titled 'How Wrong Could We Be?' where I talked about being one of the promoters of a manifesto signed in the early '60s by Aalto, Le Corbusier, everybody, which said that work on the Sagrada Familia should not continue under



am already looking. For example, I go to Paris and say, 'I think I could do the Palais Royal pretty well', and I photograph it with the idea of how I would paint it.

And the pictures of Benidorm?

For me, in Benidorm, there are two subjects: the general views, which I have done in oil and some very detailed watercolours, and street life.

So there may be some connection between this Benidorm and something more classical, like a column.

That's right, and people are surprised. In my latest book there's a chapter dedicated to the Casa Malaparte in Capri, and then there's

any circumstances. I went to see it two years ago with the architects who are working on it, and it's frightening. All the details are wrong, but the space and the light, which is the actual architecture, are mind-blowing.

It would also be interesting to talk a bit about something that's maybe akin to architecture or that trade which is so much about life: your passion for restaurants or, as you said before, about good hotels.

Good hotels are one of my vices. I've had the chance to design a few hotels, and therefore I've spent a few weekends in Barcelona hotels; that is, packed my suitcase, gone to the Hotel Arts to spend a couple of days, to learn.

And restaurants too, right?

Listen, I loved doing restaurants. La Balsa is still going. They destroyed Azulete, but I think it's a very interesting theme for interior design. Somehow a restaurant is like going partying; it can be extravagant because it's only for one day. I think if you're too masculine, if you don't have a feminine side, you can't do restaurants well. The most beautiful modern restaurant in the world was definitely the Four Seasons, which unfortunately is no longer with us; it was by Philip Johnson, who was openly homosexual, and it was lovely.

It was a very special place, right?

That's right! But now, my passion for going to

guard cuisine was an aperitif and two dishes, no jerking around; it hadn't been intellectualised to this degree. But I'm not a demanding person, with wine—although I do like a good wine—or food. With hotels I am a bit demanding though. You must understand, I'm 78 years old.

And how did your connection develop with Naples?

When I designed the Naples underground station, those were seven years of exciting work. Naples is another world, exciting but contradictory, and I think that is my last big project in terms of size and the huge amount of people who've visited it.



three-star restaurants and all that has waned. Eating 30 dishes, going there to learn and not to enjoy, I've got tired of it. As Tom Wolfe said, in the end art is a simple explanation, the painted word. But now it's the cooked work, it's all about the concept. A guy comes up and explains the food to you. They've got to explain the dish to you! I always tell this story about the designer Miguel Milà, when he saw the menu and those explanations in one of these restaurants, along came the head waiter, very polite, all in black, and asked, 'Is the gentleman familiar with our menu?' Miguel replied, stammering, 'No, it's my first day in class!' Of course, cookery used to be a different thing. When I became interested in it, van-

Where do you stay when you go to Naples?

In the same grand old hotel as always, the Excelsior.

I was going to ask you, because it's the only hotel I know. I went there for *The Sopranos*.

When I was in Naples with Joan Mariscal and Miquel Barceló—I wanted to get them involved in working on the station, although in the end it was Bob Wilson—they took us to the Excelsior. We were all very excited because of *The Sopranos*!

How did you meet Bob Wilson?

I met Bob Wilson in El Palau one day when he was putting up something and then we







had dinner together—well, I managed to get myself sat next to him—and the guy started ordering whiskies and started to open up and told me he had wanted to be an architect and that he'd studied architecture, and we got on very well. When it came to proposing an artist for the Naples station I proposed Bob Wilson. The person in charge wasn't sure, because he didn't understand what Bob could do. But Mendini was there too and was much cleverer, and he helped me. I was able to do the entire project with Bob from the start, and we had a very good understanding. He loves architecture, and it shows.

The thing is, in the end you see more architecture outside architecture than in architecture itself, right? What's more, the same thing happens in design and in painting.

Well, the architect as a stage designer is a tradition that comes from way back. We know that Leonardo da Vinci designed the Medici's parties. I've done stage design, two pieces by Buero Vallejo, and afterwards I did that fantastic one for *Death of a Salesman*. I enjoyed it a lot.

There's also always some stage design in your architectural work.

Yes, of course. But the advantage of stage design in the theatre is that you don't have regulations to follow—the freedom it gives you to work without rules, being able to do stairs without handrails, for example. In housing, architects can't do anything anymore. The mass of regulations, hygiene standards, PRM access rules, the marketability of the thing, it all narrows your field of action so much that you start asking what can you contribute in housing? A frilly façade, you can't do anything else.

In the Bauhaus era, homes were invented; that's all over now. Today, of all the star architects, none have done housing. How many homes has Norman Foster done? I'll get the Pritzker list and let's run through it; you'll see who's left. Álvaro Siza, but none of his houses would pass modern regulations. They are gradually narrowing down your range, and you have so little to play with that you end up without any margin. One exceptional example of different residential architecture is Ricardo Bofill.

Yes, I was thinking about him. But also it was just at one time.

It won't be repeated in Europe. They'd never let him do what he's done again in any country in Europe. Almost all of Ricardo Bofill's work is unrepeatable. With the Muralla Roja, 50 percent of the metres built are useless, they don't serve any purpose. Well, they serve to create architecture of course, but today, what developer would pay for that? When Ricardo had to do a skyscraper in Chicago, he came up with a prism with a pediment at the top, because the Americans know that a skyscraper has to be 25 by 25 metres, square, with a core in the middle with the lifts. That's all he could do, that's the deal now. Nobody's going to do the Chrysler Building today, you know? Ricardo did a bit of the façade and the finish. I don't know what to say to young people starting out in architecture. I tell them, 'It's a training I consider useful, but when it comes to building things, I don't know what to say to you'. When I started, I talked to bricklayers, craftsmen, and I learned with them. Now they're all lawyers and insurance agents, and I don't learn anything. It's very difficult; that's why I paint.