

Charlotte Kasper

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Transcending Construction: Susana Torre's *Walls of the House of Meanings*

At first glance, the architect Susana Torre's 1973 collage, *Walls of the House of Meanings* develops an ordered, yet ethereal, matrix (Figure 1). A small collage at the Davis Museum, it measures 9½ x 10¾ inches and uses pasted images, ink, and gouache on mylar. Susana Torre, an Argentine-born American, is not a professional artist by trade, but rather an architect, critic, and educator. In this collage, Torre applies both her background in architecture and her social consciousness to develop a work that, through referencing conceptual art, revolutionizes the very understanding of space: in this collage, she makes space malleable and, through compressing and expanding edifices, proposes a novel approach to structures as large as a city and as small as a wall. Moreover, Torre examines the impact of arranging physical structures in particular ways, inventing new methods of joining walls to one another and, through that process, joining disparate communities, all the while designing something resembling utopia.

Torre's work contains thirty-six squares, divided equally into rows and columns. Each of the work's six rows contains three squares that alternate with a liminal space, where the different elements of the squares meet. Further, each of the rows share their own visual theme. The squares alternate between standing upright and lying flat each row, so that they descend from the upper left corner of

the work to its lower right corner, like adjacent sets of stairs. Within the collage, layered on top of one another, are eighteen upright squares, as well as fifteen squares that are placed flat, diagonally, and are adorned with cross-hatching — which is done in either black ink or white gouache, depending on the square. In some cases, the “squares” at the right and left edges of the piece appear instead to be rectangles, as they are cut when coming into contact with the edge of the piece. Since the piece emphasizes regularity, it can be assumed that the rectangles in these cases are, in fact, intended to be squares.

Squares, and their relationship in space to one another, feature prominently within this collage, referencing conceptual artists, like Sol Lewitt, who made use of the grid. For conceptual artists, the relationship between art and the artist was similar to that between the edifice and the architect: the value of the work was in the concepts imbued into the work and the way in which they were ordered, rather than in the process of creating the art. Often, conceptual artists employed the visual language of a grid to represent the ordering of their ideas. Though Torre uses pattern and the concept of the grid to create regularity, she relishes breaking it. In fact, the only part of the image that remains truly unchanged throughout the collage are the lines of white gouache which cross the work horizontally and diagonally. When horizontal, the lines are doubled and pass behind the squares. Conversely, when the white lines are diagonal, they cut in front of the entire image in five regularly placed lines, moving from the upper right to the lower left, against the pattern of the rest of the piece.

In 1997, *Walls of the House of Meanings* was gifted to the Davis Museum, where it has remained ever since. Yet, the piece remains part of Torre’s consciousness, if not in her possession;¹ an

¹ Torre lost track of the collage between 1980 and 2010. She lost track of it when it was bought by a private collector from an exhibition at the MoMA, who then gifted it to the Davis Museum at Wellesley College. In 2010, the Davis Museum reached out to the artist, who enquired about its provenance. Susana Torre and Jennifer Hughes, email correspondence, 2010.

earlier photograph of the work is even published on her website (Figure 2).² In comparison with the earlier photograph, aspects of the collage are subtly different, owing to the passage of time. Indeed, though the layers of *Walls of the House of Meanings* are not obscured by these changes to the art, the photograph enlightens certain aspects of the work.

The first row contains the only three colored images in the entire collage and they all relate to natural imagery or the sky in some way. Today, the top left square appears to be an abstract image of a yellow texture, possibly of sand. However, when viewed on Torre's website, it becomes clear that the yellow rectangle in the first row has a small white circle inside of it, now covered by dirt, which alludes to a sun, not sand.³ If, indeed, the square in the upper left hand corner is interpreted as a sun, then it becomes fitting for the cross-hatched squares to be read, not as stairs, but as shadows descending from the upright walls themselves. Though subtle, this difference emphasizes the space between the walls (of the house of meaning), and therefore their movability, rather than giving the impression of different structural units stacked on top of one another, which speaks more to the concept of communal living. Interpreting the top left image as a sun, as opposed to as sand, aligns better with the subjects of the center and right images in this row, which contain clouds against a cyan sky and an aerial view of foliage, respectively. In this case, condition issues impact the ease of interpretation.

Upending the pattern, rather than contain solid squares, the second row is instead comprised of doorway-type shapes, so that they each have two supports and a lintel, but no bottom or interior. Within each doorway, the crosshatching descending from the previous row is visible, highlighting the

² Since the collage left her possession sometime in 1980 or before, the image is likely from when the collage was completed in 1973, or soon after.

Ibid.

Susana Torre, "The House of Meanings,"

<http://www.susanatorre.net/architecture-and-design/the-individual-and-the-collective/the-house-of-meanings/> [accessed May 2, 2018].

³ This square is one of those that actually take the form of a rectangle.

layers of depth in the collage. Each of the frames are drawn slightly differently, the center arch is even drawn in the white gouache rather than black ink, as is its accompanying crosshatching. In concert with each other, the squares in this row manipulate the appearance of space, so that even though the squares are equidistant, the artist implies that the first row⁴ is being lifted, floating above the rest of the grid. By rendering the squares transparent, Torre, the architect, alludes to the multitudes of ways a single, finite, space can be constructed and interpreted. Here, she emphasizes for the first time, the malleability of space in the hands of its designer.

According to the Davis files, this collage contains six pieces of newspaper in addition to the gouache, ink, and mylar.⁵ Upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent that there are actually twelve pieces of paper adhered to the image. Both the third and fourth rows contain attached squares, though the designs in each of these squares are reminiscent of the sections of the collage done in black ink and white gouache, like the crosshatching. Just as the entire collage distorts the midcentury concept of the grid, the third row does too. Though the center square contains a classic grid, the left “grid” is in fact rows of plus signs while the right “grid” is a series of horizontal and vertical dashes.

Perhaps referencing the natural and architectural elements of the larger work, the fourth row contain black and white textures that are each derived from nature and utilized in architecture. Possibly pulled from landform description map, the left square contains circles of varying sizes, which appear to be stones. Not only are stones natural formations, but they are commonly used in building edifices. The center square includes bricks which, though most commonly associated directly with architecture are also made from clay. Similarly, the third square shows a wood grain, which is a natural

⁴ Which thematically connects to the sky.

⁵ The collaged elements in the first and sixth rows.

resource that is shaped to accommodate construction, again highlighting how the architect shapes and reshapes physicality.

As with the second row, Torre develops empty space in the fifth row, though not as drastically. In this case, the squares are completely white and opaque, not allowing the cross-hatching to show through. In the second row, Torre's choice to make the squares transparent gave an impression of weightlessness to the first row and of compression in the middle rows. In conjunction with the second row, Torre manipulates space, as the opaqueness of these squares squeezes the center rows together, while slightly distancing the final row.

Though the squares in each of the rows suggest some connection, none has as much depth and immediate tangibility as the three collaged elements in the final row. The first, on the left edge of the work, contains bars, such as in a jail cell, angled sharply from the upper left of the square to the lower right, mirroring the collage's movement across the mylar. Bars also appear in the center square, though now they are locked onto the exterior window of a brick building. By moving the successive image from inside a jail cell to the exterior of a brick building, Torre suggests a transition from entrapment to freedom. As a center square, this collaged element is placed directly below the crosshatched shadow of the square two rows above it, which in this case is the textured brick, directly transitioning this architectural element from design to a functioning structure. This is furthered by the inclusion of people in this square, indeed this is the only time that the collage includes, or even references, people. However, emphasis is still placed on the construction that is being designed, as Torre cuts the image off at the necks of the seven figures, so that they only occupy the bottom sixth of the photo. The third collaged square in this row furthers the transition from entrapment to freedom which Torre actually intended her architecture to foster. In discussing her article "Space as Matrix," whose publishing was

accompanied by this collage, Torre writes that “Space as Matrix was a precursor to a checkerboard space pattern I developed for urban design, allowing the non-threatening proximity of populations of different incomes and ethnicities.”⁶ In this progression in the final row, it’s no different. The majority of the figures in the second image may be black, but one is white. This, combined with the progression from jail to a classical façade suggest this type of integration between people of different incomes, situations, and ethnicities.

As an architect, Susana Torre interacts not only with the constructions of buildings, but with the lives of people. Her architecture often reflects this, relating to developing infrastructure that integrates disparate communities.⁷ Given the progression in the final row of the collage, Torre’s artwork communicates directly with her constructions. In fact, Torre has written that the Davis collage “was the meta-project of a residential community intended to break barriers (among other things).”⁸ As the urban design model she conceptualized utilizes a checkerboard space pattern to advance the integration of disparate communities, so too does the collage. In this context, the collage, and its stair-like qualities, can be interpreted as a residential community of housing units stacked on top of one another, in a way which bridges those of different incomes and ethnicities. Additionally, by employing this checkerboard pattern while adding dimension, Susana Torre adopts the concepts of minimalism, connecting her work to that of Sol Lewitt, while reimagining and revolutionizing those elements.

⁶ Susana Torre to Charlotte Kasper, “Re: “Walls of the House of Meanings,” Davis Museum at Wellesley Inquiry,” email, 2018.

⁷ Such as with her building Fire Station Five (1984-87) in Columbus Indiana. It was designed with the purpose of eliminating the barriers between male and female firefighters. More information is available on her website: <http://www.susanatorre.net/architecture-and-design/making-room-for-women/fire-station-five>.

⁸ Torre and Hughes, email correspondence, 2010.

Overall, Torre develops a progression from the natural to the constructed, as experienced by an architect, through the four rows containing collaged elements: the first row portrays nature, the third begins the conceptualization of design, the fourth selects the materials, and the final row is the culmination of this process, the completed edifices. The collage reveals an architect experimenting with the malleability of space, which is accessible through the collage's irregularities. As an artist, magazine editor, and writer, Torre has found freedom in such experimentation, writing that "We [the female artists of her magazine publication] were outsiders. And, being outside, we could freely invent things to our own liking."⁹ By experimenting with minimalism and structure, Torre reinvents entire modes of conceptualizing architecture and space.

In her experimentation with space, Torre proposes the infinite possibilities of the wall, not only intending to break social barriers by revolutionizing urban design, but by breaking physical barriers in the very conceptualization of the wall itself. In her 1981 article "Space as Matrix," in the section "The House of Meanings (1970-1972)," Torre writes that the House of Meanings is a matrix combining "the formal integrity and completeness of an architectural object with the changing and temporary patterns that arise in the process of dwelling."¹⁰ Then, the wall, as Torre has reconceptualized it, shifts; and in shifting, accommodates the fluctuating lives of individuals while developing a utopian model of inclusivity that, not only breaks barriers, but transcends them.

⁹ Susana Torre, *The Heretics*, documentary, NTSC 4:3, directed by Joan Braderman, Produced by Crescent Diamond, 2009.

¹⁰ Susana Torre, "Space as Matrix," *Heresies* 11, Vol. 3 No. 3 (1981): 52.

ILLUSTRATIONS

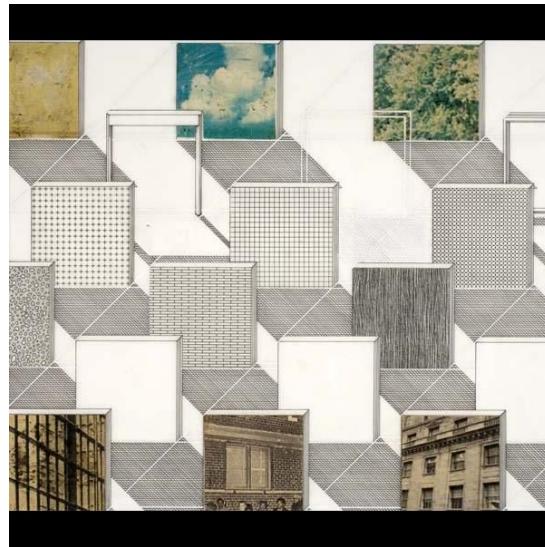


Fig. 1

Susana Torre, *Walls of the House of Meanings*, 1973, paper, ink, and gouache on mylar, 9½ x 10¾ inches, Davis Museum, Massachusetts.



Fig. 2

Susana Torre, *Walls of the House of Meanings*, 1973, digital reproduction from the author's website, www.susanatorre.net/architecture-and-design/the-individual-and-the-collective accessed May 2, 2018.

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