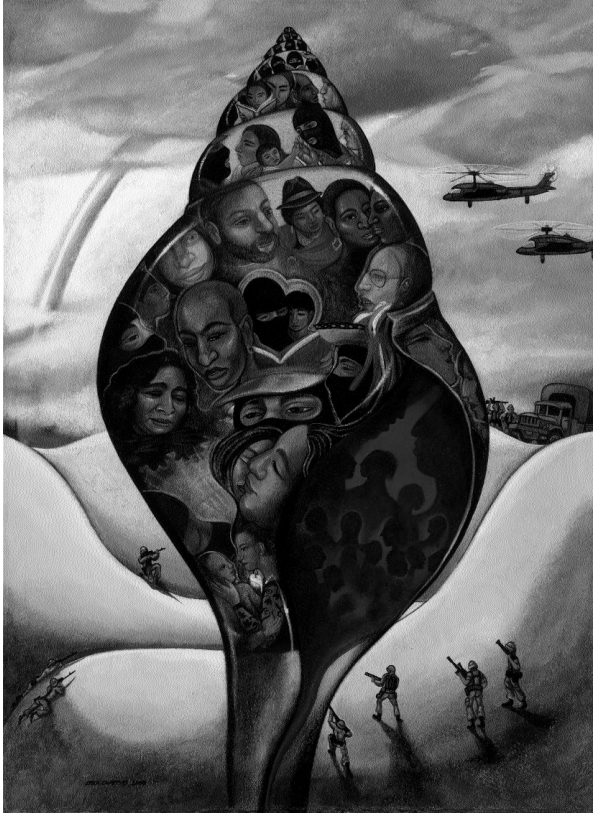


# The Seashell and The Two People



Durito sends Marcos a letter with a treatise and two stories. “The Seashell” is Durito’s theory on the CND and the construction of the first Aguascalientes. “The Story of the Two People” is for inclusion in Durito’s forthcoming book *Stories for a Sleepless Solitude*. The letter appears during a phase of the negotiations between the Zapatistas and the Mexican Government that involved “tripartite” talks among the EZLN, COCOPA and CONAI, aimed at creating an Implementation and Verification Commission for the San Andrés Accords signed the previous February. On November 7, 1996, two weeks after this communiqué was written, the formation of such a Commission was announced and was to be installed in San Cristóbal. But less than a month after the announcement, the Government reneged on its commitment to the Accords, and the effort to form such a Commission was abandoned.

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October 23, 1996

To: International and National Civil Society

From: Sup Marcos

Madam:<sup>1</sup>

Yeah, it's us again. But don't be disturbed. Not yet. Now we write to thank you for the disturbing joy that took Comandanta Ramona and, with her, all of us, to the center of Power in Mexico. We've seen some of the images of those days when the entire Mexican political system trembled as our most powerful weapon passed. And we also learned about the National Indigenous Congress and about its frank call to the struggle summarized by the subversive banner of "Never again a Mexico without us."<sup>2</sup> Yes, that "us" is an invitation difficult to resist. Well, I believe what's next is, "Never again a world without us." Don't you think? Of course, everything turned out fine. And you are right; it was like a party. Of course it must have ruined more than one person's lunch, but you know that such things happen.

Do you know what? Something very strange is happening in this country. When you show no signs of life and wrap yourself up in problems you believe to be only yours, Power smiles and leaves everything for later, but the moment you engage in speaking and in taking to the street and in dancing, the supreme government is overcome with a strong urge to dialogue and to show it is serious about wanting to resolve the problems. No, I don't know why this happens, but it's so nice when you go out and dance to that little tune that goes like . . . what was that tune? Yeah, that's the one!

Well then, I also write to tell you that we continue in the dialogue, and today (I write these lines at dawn) we finished this first encounter they call "tripartite" because one is supposed to divide oneself into three in order not to lose sight of the local, the national, and the galactic. And speaking of galaxies, I'm going back to the ceiba. No, it's not that I'm afraid that Heriberto has eaten all the candy in my absence, or that Eva has organized feminist seminars with that Pedro Infante movie called *What Has That Woman Done To You?*<sup>3</sup> No ma'am, she's done nothing to me, that's just the name of the movie. Neither am I returning to the ceiba heights because I want to avoid Olivio's killer soccer kicks or Yeniperr's questions, and believe me, one is just as dreaded as the other. No, it turns out that . . .

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1 In Spanish, "society" is a feminine noun, and thus the feminine form of address.

2 Despite government threats to arrest any Zapatistas who traveled outside Chiapas, Comandanta Ramona went to Mexico City for the founding meeting of the National Indigenous Congress (October 8-12, 1996). The sojourn of Ramona, who had become famous during the first negotiations of 1994 and had medical reasons for traveling to the capital, received much attention in the national and international press. See also "The Story of the Magical Chocolate Bunnies."

3 Pedro Infante starred in Ismael Rodríguez's 1951 film *A Toda Máquina 2 (¿Qué te ha dado esa mujer?)*.

well . . . you know . . . in the end, it's just that . . . Haven't you heard the one about the October moon being bigger, etc., than all others? Yes, well it turns out that early the other morning I got by security and . . . No . . . Really, the only thing I caught was a cold so bad that every time I sneeze . . . well, the shake-up of January 1st was nothing in comparison. Okay, the thing is, I escaped because when I am here they keep me inside four white walls where my friends don't come to see me, not from time to time, not one-by-one, not two-by-two, not from six to seven. I got out, and before I was captured by security I managed to catch sight of a moon, which reminded me of another moon two years ago . . .

And on that dawn, like this one, the moon was a solitary breast vanishing behind the nocturnal hand of desire. But on this dawn I re-read Durito's last letter, and I should warn you, Durito has a marked tendency for philosophical discourse, so along with the letter comes what follows and is self-explanatory only from its title because it's called . . .

## **The Seashell of the End and the Beginning (Neoliberalism and Architecture or the Ethics of the Search versus the Ethics of Destruction)**

In the Lacandona, in the southeastern Mexican State of Chiapas, there is a deserted village surrounded by well-armed military posts. The name of this abandoned village was Guadalupe Tepeyac. Its inhabitants, indigenous Tojolabales, were expelled by the Mexican government's army in February of 1995, as the federal troops attempted to assassinate the leadership of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation.

But it isn't the painful exile of these indigenous people, who paid for their rebellion by living in the mountains, that I wanted to talk to you about. I wanted to talk to you about an architectural masterpiece that was born on the outskirts of the then-living Guadalupe Tepeyac in July and August of 1994. Illiterate for the most part and with a third grade education among the most "educated" of them, the Tojolabal architects raised in 28 days, a structure capable of holding 10,000 participants in what the Zapatistas called "The National Democratic Convention." In honor of Mexican history, the Zapatistas called the place of the encounter "Aguascalientes." The giant meeting place had an auditorium for 10,000 seated participants, a stage for 100, a library, a computer room, kitchens, lodgings, and parking lots. They say it even had an "area for holding any troublemakers."

Well, this is all rather anecdotal and one can learn more about it through other means (there are books, reports, photos, videos and movies from that time). What I want to point out now is a detail that went unnoticed by all those present at the 1994 Aguascalientes of Guadalupe Tepeyac (this Aguascalientes was destroyed in February 1995). The detail I refer to was so large that, ironically, it couldn't be easily discerned at first glance. It is this gigantic and unnoticed detail that is the subject of this essay.

It turns out that the auditorium and the stage were in the middle of a giant seashell going and coming, without end or beginning. Let me explain; don't get frustrated. The indigenous Zapatistas had raised a more or less conventional auditorium: a sort of stage that looked like the keel of a ship—a flat part in front with chairs, and a gallery with wooden benches (taking advantage of the slope of a hill).<sup>4</sup> All in all, nothing extraordinary. If anything was interesting, it was that the benches were mounted on forked branches and tied with vines. There was no metal in the gallery.

When they began to construct the lodgings, the library and other facilities, the indigenous Tojolobales of the Zapatista rebellion, now makeshift architects, began to construct houses in an apparent disorder that, or so thought the Sup then, were only scattered about the surroundings of the gigantic auditorium. It wasn't until he was assessing the capacity of each building, that the Sup noticed that one of the houses was "crooked," that is, it had an inexplicable break in one of its edges. He didn't pay much attention. It was Comandante Tacho, a Tojolabal, who asked him,

"What do you think of the seashell?"

"What seashell?" the Sup answered, following the Zapatista tradition of answers that are questions, the eternal game of the question to the mirror.

"Well, the one that surrounds the auditorium," answered Comandante Tacho as if he had said, "The day has light." The Sup only stared back at him and Tacho understood that the Sup did not understand what he meant, so he took him to the "crooked" house and showed him the roof where the cross-timbers made a capricious break.

"This is where the shell curves," he told him.

The Sup must have put on a "So?" face (similar to the one you must have now), which is why Comandante Tacho hurried to make a drawing in the mud with a stick. Tacho's drawing showed the location of all the buildings that surrounded the auditorium and yes, thanks to that break in the "crooked" house, the whole thing looked like a seashell. The Sup agreed in silence after looking at the drawing. Then Comandante Tacho left to see about the tarp that would cover the auditorium in case it rained.

The Sup was left standing there, in front of the "crooked" house, thinking that the "crooked" house was not really "crooked." It was only the broken curve of the seashell that needed to be drawn. He was doing that when a journalist approached him and asked, looking for a response of profound political content, what Aguascalientes meant to the Zapatistas.

"A seashell," answered the Sup laconically.

"A seashell?" he asked, and looked at him as if he hadn't understood the question.

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<sup>4</sup> This vision of the auditorium as a ship was a metaphor around which Marcos wove his opening address to the CND.

“Yes,” he told him. And, showing him the point of the break of the “crooked” house, the Sup left.

Yes, I agree with you. The seashell of Aguascalientes could only have been discerned from above. What’s more, only from a certain height.

I mean, you had to fly very high to discover the Zapatista seashell that was being drawn on these poor rebel lands. On one of its edges, there was a library and on another the old “safe house.” The history of that “safe house” is similar to that of the EZLN in the Mayan indigenous communities. That little house was built far from the village, so no one would see them, the first Tojolabales who joined the EZLN. There they held meetings, they studied, and they gathered the tortillas and beans that they would send to the mountains where the insurgents were.

So, there was the Mayan seashell. The spiral with no beginning or end. Where does a seashell begin and end? At its most inner or outer part? Does a seashell go in or out?

The seashell of the Mayan rebel leaders began and ended at the “safe house,” but it also began and ended at the library. The place of the encounter, of the dialogue, of the transition, of the search, *that* was the seashell of Aguascalientes.

From what “architectural” tradition did the indigenous Zapatistas borrow their idea of the seashell? I don’t know, but surely the seashell, that spiral, is as inviting in coming as it is in going, and in truth, I wouldn’t dare to say which part of a seashell begins or ends it.

Months later, in October of 1994, a small group from civil society arrived at Aguascalientes to complete the installation of electricity in the library. They left after a few days of work. That particularly cold and foggy morning, the moon was a promise upon which to rest the cheek and desire, and a cello bled a few notes at midnight in a light mist. It was like a movie. The Sup watched from a corner, protected by the shadows and the ski mask. A movie. The beginning or the end of a movie? After that group left, no one else returned to Aguascalientes until the party at year’s end. Then they disappeared again. On February 10, 1995, air-transported, Federal troops took Guadalupe Tepeyac. The first thing they did when they entered Aguascalientes was to destroy the library and the safe house, the beginning and end of the seashell. Then they destroyed the rest.

For some strange reason, the breaking-point of the crooked house remained standing for several months afterward. It is said that in December of 1995, it fell only after other Aguascalientes were born in the mountains of the Mexican south-east.<sup>5</sup>

All of the above shows that the ethics of Power are the same as that of destruction, and the ethics of the seashell are the same as that of the search. And this is very important for architecture and for the understanding of neoliberalism. Right?

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5 The “other” Aguascalientes were the five autonomous villages that hosted the Intercontinental Encounter in the summer of 1996: La Realidad, La Garrucha, Morelia, Oventic and Roberto Barrios.

That's how Durito's thesis ends, which, as you can tell, is only for academics. . .

So what is all this about beetles, seashells, and blushing moons? Well, the truth is that ten years ago on a morning in October, Old Antonio explained to me that a seashell is used for seeing within yourself and for jumping up, but I'll tell you about that on another occasion. I share with you now Durito's thesis because he's very demanding about what he means when he says, "Humanity should benefit from my great knowledge."

Yes, you're right. I also think that, for a beetle, he's very pedantic, but he argues that knights-errant are not pedantic, but simply knowledgeable about the strength of their arms and the size of their talent, especially when it comes to beating up scoundrels and picking on rogues.

And so madam, I say goodbye. We hope you don't forget that we're still [out] here. Well, we hope that at least you don't forget too soon.

*Vale. Salud*, and the unanswered question is: if one is inside the seashell, which way should one go? Towards the inside or the outside?

From the mountains of the Mexican Southeast  
Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos  
Mexico, October 1996

P.S. that fulfills its editorial duty - Oh! I almost forgot, in Durito's letter there is a story that, supposedly, I should add to his book *Stories for A Sleepless Solitude*, in the section called "Stories For Deciding." Here goes then, the story is called:

## **The Story of the Live Person and the Dead Person**

Once there was a live person and a dead person.

And the dead person said to the live person,

"My, I envy you, so restless."

And then the live person said to the dead person,

"My, I envy you, so tranquil."

And so they were, envying one another, when suddenly, at full gallop, a bay horse at bay went by.

End and moral of the story: I reiterate that every final choice is a trap. It's necessary to find the bay horse at bay.

Don Durito de la Lacandona

(For fan letters, interview requests, carnations, and signatures of support for the "Beetle Anti-Big-Boots Society" please write to "Little Huapac Hole #69, Mountains of the Mexican Southeast (right next to where the Sup lives)." Please note for phone calls: if the answering machine doesn't pick up, don't worry. It's because I don't have one.)

*Vale* once again. *Salud*, and since we're talking about the traps of final choices everyone will agree with me that when it comes to choosing whether to come or go . . . it's always better to come . . .

The Sup with the flu and, obviously, something of a fever.

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