“Stone upon Stone”: From Pablo Neruda’s House in Isla Negra to The Heights of Macchu Picchu

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Pablo Neruda’s long poem The Heights of Macchu Picchu (1945) transformed the “lost city of the Incas” into a Latin American symbol. During the two years that passed between his visit to the site and writing the poem, Neruda witnessed the art of cut-stone masonry in the process of adding onto his house at Isla Negra on the Chilean coast northwest of Santiago. By examining the design and building of this addition, the article explores the imprint that both the construction project and his visit to Machu Picchu had on his work.

Perhaps no one has been more inspired by Machu Picchu’s astonishing demonstration of pre-Columbian culture than one of its first visitors, Latin America’s foremost poet and Nobel Laureate (1971), the Chilean Pablo Neruda (1904–73). On October 1943, surrounded by the dramatic topography and magnificent stone structures of the “lost city of the Incas,” Neruda made a fundamental discovery that would, in his own words, “add another layer of growth to my poetry.” Rather than considering this as an exclusive accomplishment of Inca culture, Neruda saw in Machu Picchu “the roots of American history, ‘mixed and below the earth.’”

While most of Neruda’s poems were written within minutes or hours of an inspiring experience, this time he was plagued by unanswered questions: “[W]here were the people? How could they disappear? I felt so strongly about that abysmal loss. I had the feeling that if it was done once, it is possible to do it again.” Thus it was only in September 1945, two years after his visit, that Neruda began working on his poem, completing it by early 1946. During this two-year period between his visit to the archeological site and writing the poem, Neruda carried out his successful campaign to become senator for Tarapacá and Antofagasta (he was elected on March 4, 1945), and he joined Chile’s Communist Party.

Also during this period Neruda commissioned an addition to his writing retreat in the developing coastal hamlet of Isla Negra. Rather than explaining his needs to the ar-
architect, the Catalanian Germán Rodríguez Arias (1902–1987), archival drawings and letters provide evidence that Neruda sketched floor plans, wrote descriptions, and personally selected materials to be incorporated into the construction. The result was a collaboration in which the poet played the leading role and the architect was limited primarily to translating the poet’s ideas into construction drawings. Two stone structures were added to the existing building: a cylindrical tower for the entrance, and a rectilinear volume for the studio with a ribbon window framing the ocean view. At Neruda’s direction, this latter space integrated a large rock existing on the site, while its fireplace incorporated stones he personally selected and carefully arranged, “stone upon stone.”

Neruda’s visit to the ruins of Machu Picchu, the discovery he made there, and the personal and political experiences that followed were fundamental to the development of his ideology and poetry. But we cannot dismiss his involvement in the addition to his Isla Negra house as a further influential experience. Although there is no formal relationship between the structures (or building techniques) employed in Machu Picchu and the house at Isla Negra (the design was completed prior to Neruda’s visit to Machu Picchu), the construction process allowed the poet to develop an appreciation and understanding for stone in its natural state as well as transformed into ashlars and assembled into walls.

It was precisely in this redesigned house that Neruda wrote his landmark poem The Heights of Macchu Picchu. From 1945 to 1973, nine new additions to the house followed, making it almost impossible today to recognize the original structure and the first addition (FIG. 1). But as with the first addition, there was often a direct correspondence between Neruda’s literary production and changes he made to the house. For example, it was after a second addition and remodeling of the dining room that Neruda began to exhibit his collection of objects and wrote his homage to common objects, Elementary Odes (1954).

By scrutinizing drawings, letters, photographs, and memoirs, this article reconstructs the dialogue between the client and the architect during the design and construction of the first addition in order to study the influence this building experience had in Neruda’s poetry.

THE HOUSE

From 1927 to 1943 diplomatic duties kept Neruda away from Chile. Although he recognized great value in his experiences in the Foreign Affairs Ministry, during a brief return to Chile from December 1937 until March 1939, Neruda felt the imperative to return to his homeland. “I can live only in my own country,” he wrote in his Memoirs. “I cannot live without having my feet and my hands on it and my ear against it, without feeling the movement of her waters and its shadows, without feeling my roots reach down into its soil for maternal nourishment.” Moreover, he “felt the pressing need to write a central poem that would bring together the historical events, the geographical situations, the life and the struggles of our [the Chilean] peoples.” The new poem, Canto General de Chile, required Neruda to throw himself into his writing “with more devotion and energy.” To do so, he sought to distance himself from Santiago’s noise and distractions.

Through a small newspaper advertisement, the poet and his partner at the time, the Argentinean Delia del Carril, learned of a property in the coastal hamlet of Las Gaviotas. Remote and barely known by anyone except the local fishermen and the two families who vacationed there, it was the perfect place for Neruda to isolate himself and become fully involved in the writing of his new book.

On the summit of a rocky slope devoid of any vegetation but cacti sat a small stone masonry house. Neruda was immediately captivated by the desolate coastal landscape bathed by the “large, wild and blue” Pacific Ocean. As he would later recall, during his first visit to the site he “felt the pang of
this smell of winter at the sea, a mixture of sweet herbs and salty sand, seaweed and thistle.” Similarly, the extraordinary agglomerations of black rocks scattered across the coast spoke to him “in a hoarse and drenching language, a jumble of marine cries and primal warnings.” Even the yellow sand of the beach was “insurmountable” to the poet. Neruda immediately realized that “Isla Negra’s wild coastal strip, with its turbulent ocean, was the place to give myself passionately to the writing of my new song.”

The landscape, the site, and the view were so striking that neither Neruda nor del Carril saw any inconvenience in the house’s limited area (68 square meters), its brief program (“a dining room, a bathroom and two bedrooms,” del Carril recalled), or the fact that it was still unfinished. Therefore, they purchased and completed Neruda’s writing retreat, occupying it from 1938 to January 1939, the date of their departure for Paris, where the poet served as consul for Spanish emigration. During this time, frequent walks along the coast allowed Neruda to become familiar with the area’s rocks. Like the local fishermen, he saw, in the largest of the rock formations that stood out of the water, a black island. Soon thereafter, he began calling his house, and later the hamlet, Isla Negra.

Isla Negra quickly proved to be inspiring, and consequently, Neruda was productive. In 1938 he wrote the first poem for his book project _Canto General de Chile_, “Winter Ode to the Mapocho River.” And in 1940, also at Isla Negra, he wrote “Botany,” “Atacama,” “Ocean,” “Hymn and Homecoming,” and “Almagro” (later known as “Discoverers of Chile”).

**THE PROJECT**

Despite its inspiring qualities, by early 1940 the house must have felt small and inadequate for Neruda’s writing needs. It had originally been planned as one of three vacation homes...
that Eladio Sobrino, a Spanish seafarer, had commissioned to his daughter Luz, an architecture student. The Sobrino family would keep one of the houses and put the other two up for sale. As a real estate property, Sobrino had taken no risks in her design. She positioned the house on the flattest area of the site, between two prominent rocks and at a safe distance (eight meters) from the rocky slope down to the ocean. As a result of its traditional layout and structural system, a cut-stone masonry wall partitioned the interior space along the east-west axis. And with the exception of the dining room (twelve square meters), most likely used as a studio by Neruda, all of the rooms were very similar in size. The size of the windows was also limited (a maximum of two meters in width and 1.20 meters in height) by Sobrino’s choice to use timber for the lintels and to set the sills 80 centimeters off the floor (Figs. 3–5).

The poet soon realized that the placement of the house on the site, its layout, and window sizes did not privilege the breathtaking views of the coast he found so inspiring. However, short of money and nearing his departure for Mexico in August 1940, where he would serve as consul general, Neruda was forced to postpone any ideas he might have had for changes and improvements until his eventual return to Chile in November 1943.

While in Mexico, the poet would come to the realization of an America he did not know. Impressed by his discovery, he felt a need to “unite our continent, describe it, build it, recover it.” The poem *Canto General de Chile* thus expanded to *Canto General*, a glorious hymn to Latin America. The book was finally completed in 1949 and comprises a collection of 231 poems divided in fifteen sections that trace the history, geography and people of the Americas from 1400 to 1949. While engaged in this project, in 1942, Neruda wrote “America, I Do Not Invoke Your Name in Vain,” tackling varied aspects of Latin America in a single collection of poems.

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**Figure 3.** Existing house: site plan. Drawing by Lorena Paz Akin, based on Elena Mayorga, “Las Casas de Neruda.”

**Figure 4.** Existing house: plan. 1. dining room; 2. kitchen; 3. bedroom; 4. bathroom. Drawing by Lorena Paz Akin, based on Elena Mayorga, “Las Casas de Neruda.”

**Figure 5.** Existing house: section A-A. Study of Neruda’s view of the ocean and rocks from his studio. Drawing by Lorena Paz Akin, based on drawings by the author.
Stylistically, however, according to Hernán Loyola, “the text will remain isolated, without continuation, attesting to the difficulties Neruda encountered in finding the exact tone for the book [Canto General].”

Eager to return to Chile and to a working environment that would contribute to the completion of the book project he had in front of him, sometime in March 1943, nine months ahead of his return to Chile, Neruda commissioned an addition — the first of many — to his Isla Negra house. The architect for the project was Germán Rodríguez Arias, who in the 1920s and 30s, along with Josep Lluis Sert and others, had cofounded a Catalonian progressive architecture group called GATAPAC — Grup d’Arquitectes i Tècnics Catalans per el Progrés de l’Arquitectura Contemporània [Group of Catalanian Architects and Technical Experts for the Progress of Contemporary Architecture]. He had arrived in Chile from Spain’s Civil War in 1940 under the country’s program for exiles, a program Neruda had encouraged and worked for as Chilean consul for Spanish emigration in Paris. Despite his professional credentials, by 1943 Rodríguez Arias’s degree had not been recognized in Chile (and never would be). Thus, Neruda was one of his first clients.

It would be logical to think that by commissioning the addition to Rodríguez Arias, Neruda was expecting a modernist design for his house, particularly given that, as Chile’s consul in Madrid (1934–36), he had lived in the recently completed apartment building Casa de las Flores (1930–32), one of Spain’s earliest examples of avant-garde architecture. Likewise, as consul in charge of the emigration of Spanish refugees in Paris in 1939, Neruda had been particularly interested in the contribution Spanish immigrants could make to the modernization of Chile. This, however, did not prove to be the case. Rather than simply explaining his ideas to the architect, a series of drawings leading to the project illustrate how a dialogue took place between the poet and the architect. Specifically, they reveal a collaborative practice in which Neruda played a leading role, and in which Rodríguez Arias had to accommodate himself to Neruda’s taste for vernacular design. The resulting project combined modernist principles (basic geometric forms, an open floor plan, horizontal windows) with traditional architecture, employing local materials and construction techniques.

Using his green-ink fountain pen, a signature trait of his writing, Neruda made a sketch of his initial idea. A close look at this apparently naïve drawing reveals how he carefully diagrammed the conditions of the site. For example, the sea is represented by a ship sailing over waves (a customary view from the site); a scribble is used to represent the rocky slope to the south; and a circle is used to show the location of a large group of boulders close to the property line. Despite the availability of more space to the east of the existing building, Neruda chose the steepest area of the site for the addition. He proposed a single “L”-shaped space there, with which he would double the area of the house — and more importantly, secure not only an unobstructed view from his studio to the ocean but also a view to the island of black rocks that gave origin to the name Isla Negra (figs. 6, 7).

A small pencil sketch most likely done by Rodríguez Arias contrasts with Neruda’s naïveté. In it, the architect...
proposed breaking the “L”-shaped area in two to separate programmatic uses: one space to serve as an entry, and another in which to study and write. In accordance to his modernist principles, each of these new spaces was to be inscribed in a distinct but basic geometry: a cylinder for the entry and a rectangle for the studio (implied in the drawing with a single line). Pencil traces show how the circular space was first aligned along the south facade of the existing building and later repositioned to best articulate both the old and the new construction.

In a second drawing, far more detailed than the first, Neruda then presented his ideas for the addition’s layout and elevation. The poet adopted Rodríguez Arias’s proposed rectangular and circular spaces. He specified the measurements for the studio (eight meters wide by twelve meters long), and he showed it covered by a gable roof running perpendicular to the facade. The entry space would be contained in a seven-meter-tall cylindrical tower with a conical roof. Regarding materials, stone was to be used for all the walls, while the entry was to be paved in ceramic tiles (figs. 8, 9).

The poet used text to label the drawings on this sheet of paper (“plan,” and “appearance,” further explaining, “this is viewed from the street”). Moreover, Neruda labeled aspects of the site (beach, street, boundary with Uribe) as well as elements and features of the project (door, staircase, tower, large fireplace, wall-to-wall window). Unlike the first drawing, most likely produced during a meeting with the architect, the use of text suggests that on some occasions Neruda may have been away from Santiago and used letters to interact with Rodríguez Arias. It was thus absolutely critical to make sure everything was clear in the drawings. If this was the case, he may have sent this drawing from his consular post in Mexico, or even from Antofagasta (Chile), from where, on March 5, 1943, he sent Rodríguez Arias a postcard.

In fact, a third drawing, this time in pencil, was done on light blue stationery from either a hotel, organization, or the poet’s own apartment in Mexico City. Again we find Neruda carefully labeling the drawing, apparently to make sure the architect would, first, identify the “project” within the drawing, and, second, take note of the main features of the house: a large fireplace and a large window at the south end of the study. Additionally, he specified that he expected the tower to surpass the new building by three meters. Although very similar to the second drawing, in this new layout the studio was displaced to the south, possibly acknowledging the proximity of the rocky slope, but also, given the poet’s interest, to integrate an existing rock into the studio space (figs. 10, 11).

Following this dialogue, in the winter of 1943 Rodríguez Arias put together the final project for the addition for Isla Negra. In this final version we can observe two formal modifications. First, to accommodate the project to the topography, the length of the studio was shortened from twelve to nine meters. To compensate for the loss of area, the architect then changed the footprint from a rectangle to a trapezoid and added a loft at the northernmost end of the room. The idea of a loft was not new to Neruda; in his house in Santiago,
the studio-library, completed in 1943, was designed as a two-story space with a mezzanine leading to a library (FIG. 12). The second and most notable change from Neruda’s drawings, however, concerned the tower. Rodríguez Arias proposed a more modern version: a flat-roof that recalls a “Mediterranean” structure. Whether this was the poet’s or the architect’s idea is unclear, particularly since in the late 1960s Neruda had a conical roof added to the tower. However, it is important to note that a draft section drawing of the house from 1943 shows the tower with a flat roof (FIG. 13). Likewise, it appears that the intention behind the eventual change of form was not exclusively aesthetic, but functional. Rodríguez Arias also indicated a narrow opening in the ceiling of the tower’s bedroom, through which Neruda could gain access to the rooftop. From there, Neruda would have a privileged view of his entire surroundings.

Attuned to Neruda’s fascination with the sea and his description of himself as a “captain on terra firme,” the solid stone house also incorporated elements and proportions from ship design. Among these were the alignment of openings in the tower; for example, rather than having the door to the garden or the studio directly opposite the access to the house, these were positioned to correspond almost exactly with the cardinal points of a compass (south and west, respectively). This attitude was further evident in the drawings made of the house once the addition was complete (as-built drawings) — particularly on the second floor, where the bedroom window...
faces directly south so that the bed is oriented in an east-west direction (figs. 14–18).

With the exception of the large studio space, the rooms as well as the circulation areas were generally small, as if they had been specially tailored to Neruda’s size.34 For example, the floor area of the tower was precisely the minimum size required for a full-size bed. And the circulation spaces lead-
ing to and from the loft and tower were for the most part very tight: the stairs to the loft space were only 70 cm. wide and extremely steep; the balcony leading to the tower bedroom was barely 50 centimeters wide below the dormer window. Likewise, access to the tower roof was through a narrow space, only 60 centimeters in width. The same was true for doorways, which ranged from 1.80 to 1.85 meters in height and from 70 to 80 centimeters in width.

The resulting design was a combination of modern and vernacular architecture (or rather the architecture of the traditional vacationer house).

**Figure 16 (left).** As-built: section B-B through the access and tower. Drawing by Lorena Paz Akin, based on drawings by the author.

**Figure 17 (bottom left).** As-built: section C-C through balcony leading to the tower bedroom. Drawing by Lorena Paz Akin, based on drawings by the author.

**Figure 18 (bottom right).** As-built: section D-D through studio and loft space. Rodríguez Arias carefully distributed the tie-beams to distract attention from the orientation of the west wall. Drawing by Lorena Paz Akin, based on drawings by the author.
THE CONSTRUCTION

Although the project dates from mid-1943, construction work must have only started once Neruda and del Carril returned from Mexico in November of that year. Throughout the subsequent two-year period of construction, nothing impeded Neruda from being involved with the addition, not even his political activities during his candidacy for senator from Tarapacá and Antofagasta (from December 1943 to March 1945). Every time he could, he would go to Isla Negra to supervise the progress, and it appears he was personally in charge of hiring the workers. Thus, his close friend Tomás Lago described the arrangements made in July 1944 with Alejandro García, who agreed to complete the work by early 1945 for a reasonable amount.35

As the construction progressed, the poet constantly came up with new ideas, to the point that del Carril stopped paying attention to them, annoying him.36 Though minor, these all meant changes to the initial project. For example, adjacent to the tower bedroom he added a small introspective writing space with a built-in desk.37 And to allow the light of the rising sun to flood this space and tower bedroom, he chose to have a small window added on the east wall of the new writing quarter.38 Similarly, given his theatrical character, a second entrance to the house was added. This duplication of circulation permitted the poet to come and go from the studio without being noticed by guests. On some occasions the ideas were playful. For example, Lago recalled how in 1944 Neruda, after some [had some] cacti full of flowers planted in the large stones that penetrate the room under construction. They looked very nicely because there is not roof yet and in front of the sea they are in their natural environment, but later, it is very likely that they will not live enclosed in a room.39

As evidenced in his second drawing, Neruda was very careful about the selection of construction materials. He insisted on using only local stone for the walls and Chilean woods for all other structural elements. Such was his determination that in a June 1968 interview, sitting in the studio across from the fireplace, he proudly claimed that “the entire house was made using Chilean materials.”40 However, to allow for the six-meter-wide window facing the sea, the poet had to agree to the incorporation of a technology foreign to stone masonry and timber structures: a reinforced concrete beam. In fact, all of the lintels, including those for the smallest of windows, were made of reinforced concrete. In his attempt to be faithful to his principle of using only local materials and technologies, these lintels (and beams) were veneered in stone. This decision was most likely Neruda’s and would become standard practice in later additions. For example, the 1967 documentary film I Am Pablo Neruda shows workers pouring reinforced concrete walls for a new addition then under construction.41 These were later covered with stones.

In some cases, the selected materials were less traditional, but nothing distracted Neruda from his choices. He would find materials on the site, or nearby, and then would charge the architect with incorporating them into the project.42 For the fireplace, Neruda personally selected oval stones from a nearby estuary. Covered in rust, urine, or red moss, these had a “very particular ardent color.”43 Advised about the absolute need to clean the stones prior to using them inside the house, Neruda responded: “it doesn’t matter; they are still very beautiful for their purpose.”44 At another time, he showed up on the site with a tree trunk to be used in its natural state in place of the single column in the studio. Similarly, he collected shells from the beach to be embedded in the poured concrete pavement of the first floor of the tower; the purpose was to recall the sensation of the beach when stepping barefoot into the house (figs. 19, 20).

By the end of July 1944 the construction work was well on its way: walls reached two meters in height, which was close to 50 percent of the total height of the house.45 And by March 1945, the construction must have been in its finishing stages. By that time, a letter dated March 1, 1945, confirmed Neruda’s leading role in the project. He addressed the architect with authority, giving him clear directions on what he expected should be done in the house. In the letter he asked the architect:

Why haven’t you bought the glass. Did I leave an order with the firm we already know? . . . Have the pieces of furniture I ordered García for the small room upstairs [next to the tower] been made? . . . Don’t forget to demand our Phoenician friend Aguadé to use well grained pine that is available. . . . Is the staircase to the tower finished?46

It was precisely in this house, recently completed, surrounded by the stone walls he had witnessed being built, where Neruda wrote his landmark poem The Heights of Macchu Picchu.

THE HOUSE AND POETRY

After its purchase, every time Neruda felt the need to write, he retreated to Isla Negra. Thus, the poet’s close involvement in the design and construction was ultimately based on a desire to secure an environment that would stimulate his writing. This was critical in the early 1940s, given the difficulties he faced finding the exact tone for Canto General. However, the addition — and the views it framed of rocks and ocean — proved to be inspiring. From its completion in 1945 to February 1948, when Neruda had to go into hiding (and later
FIGURE 19. (ABOVE) Interior of the studio space. Neruda personally selected oval stones from a nearby estuary; these were incorporated in the fireplace. Photo by the author, 2007, with permission of Fundación Neruda.

FIGURE 20 (RIGHT). A: Neruda had a tree trunk in its natural state used as the single column in the studio space. B: Sea shells from the beach were embedded in the pavement of the entry space below the tower. Photos by the author, 2007, with permission of Fundación Neruda.
Heights of Macchu Picchu

With assistance of the Mexican architect Juan O’Gorman, the
influential to Neruda was his friend the Mexican muralist Di-
Teotihuacan and Mayan architecture. Thus, as he prepared
his return to Chile in early 1943, Neruda opted to follow
Rivera’s ideas. The addition to his Isla Negra house would
combine modern principles (basic geometric forms — a cy-
lindrical and a rectilinear volume — and an ample open-plan
studio space with a ribbon window framing the ocean view)
with traditional forms (a gable roof) as well as local materials
and technologies.

But not all decisions around the design of the house were
political; the poet’s interest in the use of cut-stone masonry
also responded to his particular love for Isla Negra’s rocky
landscape. During his frequent walks along the coast, he
became extremely familiar with the local rock formations.
Based on form, he named them “Bull,” “Lion,” “Ship,” “Table,” etc., and eventually a book dedicated to them came to mind,
which materialized in 1961 under the title The Stones of
Chile.53 Fascinated by this landscape, he had rocks from the
site cut into ashlars to be used for the walls of the addition.
He had an existing rock left in its natural state (something Ri-
vera had also done at Anahuacalli), and he directed that stones
from the nearby estuary be integrated into the studio space.
Moreover, shells from the beach were used to pave the entry
space, and he was careful that the main window of the studio
space framed the view to a large “island” of black rocks. This
single space evokes the natural environment of Isla Negra’s
coast, strengthening the poet’s intimate relationship to the
site. To a certain extent, with his selection of local building
materials, he was reconfiguring the landscape into his house.
It could not have been otherwise; when questioning the origin
and purpose of the rocks of Isla Negra in his poem “Stones,”
Neruda concluded that these were placed there so that he
“may construct, with iron and wood, a house in the sand.”54

Similarly, Neruda was passionate about the ocean; the
coastal landscape, ships, and nautical artifacts fascinated
him. “Sometimes it is so good I applaud,” he recalled in a
1969 interview.55 Securing a view to the waves bursting into
the rocks was indispensable. Thus, the section drawn across
the studio demonstrates how the height of the ribbon window
was carefully studied to guarantee Neruda a view of the rocks
and ocean when sitting at a table or desk. (Even from the loft,
one can see a thin strip of the ocean.) In fact, in his poem
“The Sea,” he wrote: “The Pacific Ocean was overflowing the
borders of the map. There was no place to put it. It was so
large, wild and blue that it didn’t fit anywhere. That’s why it
was left in front of my window.”56

On September 1, 1943, once the drawings for the addi-
tion to the Isla Negra house were complete, Neruda began
his return from Mexico to Chile. Intent on discovering the
America he did not know, he made stops in Panamá, Co-
lombia, Ecuador and Peru, where he arrived on October 19.
Guided by one of the most knowledgeable experts on Cuzco’s
pre-Columbian and indigenous culture, José Uriel García,
Neruda visited the recently discovered lost city of the Incas,
Machu Picchu.57 In the poet’s own words: “On those difficult
heights, among those glorious, scattered ruins, I had found
the principles of faith I needed to continue my poetry.”58

Hidden in a dramatic topography covered by dense ve-
etation, Machu Picchu had largely survived the destructive
forces of the colonial period. To archeologists and histori-
ans, its “discovery” by Hiram Bingham in 1911 provided “a
unique opportunity to make a comprehensive review of so
much of the manners and customs of an important center of
Inca culture.”59 To intellectuals, Machu Picchu exemplified
the achievements and developments of the pre-Columbian
cultures, allowing them to question what America’s present
would have been like had the development of these cultures
not been abruptly interrupted in the 1500s by the Spanish
conquest and the colonial period that followed.
In an interview immediately following his return to Chile, Neruda referred to the grandeur of Machu Picchu. For him, the ruins were the most important archeological discovery in the world. “It is something stupendous to sit on those stone benches surrounded by an amphitheater of immense structures at the peak of America’s highest mountains,” he said. And even though excavations and explorations had been underway since 1912, by the date of Neruda’s visit the origin and purpose of the city, as well as the identity of its occupants and builders, was still a mystery. The poet found no answer to his questions: “What happened to its builders? What happened to its inhabitants? What did they leave us except for the dignity of the stone to give us news about their lives, their intentions, their disappearance?”

Despite the impression the site made on Neruda, he made no changes to the design of the addition to his house at Isla Negra. However, the construction process was to prove insightful to him, and would help him answer some of his questions. Beyond his appreciation for traditional trades, Neruda admired the people who practiced them, and witnessing them at work excited him. The construction of Isla Negra allowed Neruda to closely observe the art of cut stone. In particular, he remarked on García’s strength when he carried the boulders used to extract the ashlars. He was equally impressed by his knowledge and ability first to cut out the ashlars and later fit each large square-cut stone in place. His poem “El pueblo” (written sometime between 1956 and 1966) is a tribute to García and attests to the poet’s clear understanding of the trade of cut-stone masonry. As Neruda wrote,

When years later Germán [Rodríguez Arias], the architect, took a hand at it, he had to come to an understanding with the master builder, Don Alejandro [García]. His hands are something to see. There is no stone that can withstand them. . . . There is no stone cutter or carpenter like him, no mason or stupendous drinker of red wine like the Master Builder.

Germán verified how Don Alejandro would lift one of those heavy, squared stones, look at it against the light and rapidly trim the edge. The stone would sparkle. And then it would be confined by the application of mortar. In this way the house was like a cluster of granite grapes, which gradually grew in the tremendous hands of the master builder García.

And Don Alejandro García hefting the stone block, cutting the granite grapes, and making my house grow as if it were a little tree of stone, planted and raised by his great dark hands.

Neruda was more specific about the significance cut-stone masonry had for him in the poem “Party’s End.” As he wrote there, “What can I say without touching my palms to the land? // I have built what I could / out of natural stone, like a native, open-handed, / I have worked with my reason, unreason, my caprices, / my fury, and poise.” He would even go further in his Memoirs; in reference to his visit to Machu Picchu, he stated: “I felt that my own hands had labored there at some point in time, digging furrows, polishing the rocks . . . . I felt Chilean, Peruvian, American.”

In The Heights of Machu Picchu, the poet did not detail the construction process itself. In his task as the “spokesmen and rescuer of a collective memory,” Neruda saw his main goal as to write the history of this site from a new perspective. Rather than describing Machu Picchu and the ruling class that had inhabited the lost city, Neruda focused his tribute on those who were and are forgotten — the struggling men “who worked the stone and piled it up.” As Neruda’s biographer, Volodia Teitelboim, has pointed out, the ideas developed in the poem reveal Neruda’s position in regard to society and history.
“Party’s End” (in Ceremonial Songs); and The House in the Sand. Similarly, he used cut-stone masonry as a material in other house projects. At Michelocán (1943–1946?) stones personally selected by Neruda were used for the construction of the fireplace and the room surrounding it; at La Chascona (1953–1956) the perimeter walls of the living room were built of cut-stone masonry; and stones were used again in another addition at Isla Negra in the late 1960s. At his house La Sebastiana (1959–1961), where massive stone walls were impossible to build, the poet had his friend, the artist María Martner, incorporate stone mosaic work precisely around the fireplace. Interestingly, Martner was also a friend of O’Gorman.

THE POET, THE ARCHITECT

In conclusion, though it is true that Neruda’s house in Isla Negra had already been designed by the time he visited the ruins of Machu Picchu in 1943, there is no doubt that this visit left a tremendous imprint both on his personal and professional life. On the one hand, it enriched his poetic output. But, more importantly, from the standpoint of Neruda and architecture, it developed in him an appreciation not only for objects (such as stones, especially), but for what can be done with stones and similar objects. One could argue, in effect, that the Machu Picchu experience, compounded by his Mexican experience — in particular, his knowledge of Diego Rivera’s project at Anahuacalli — provided the impetus for the addition to the house in Isla Negra that ensued. Granted, Neruda’s house in Isla Negra does not have the monumentality of either of these two megaprojects, to say the least. But where Neruda, the architect, truly revealed himself was in the attention he paid to each and every detail of the nine additions that were ultimately made to it.

As I have shown in this article through an examination of archival drawings, letters, floor plans and sketches, the Chilean poet supervised almost every aspect of the additions, depriving Rodríguez Arias of the freedom to develop his own modernist ideas. In the end, then, the Isla Negra house became a mixture of modernist and traditional styles, giving preference, foremost, to building materials from the site itself, such as black stones, wood, and shells from the beach. But as I have also shown, Neruda’s Machu Picchu experience engendered in him a love and, above all, a much deeper appreciation for Latin America and its people, which had a direct impact on his poetry. From this angle, it is no accident that he should write his magnificent poem The Heights of Machu Picchu in his house in Isla Negra, as if to thank the Inca site for having inspired him and taught him in the first place.

REFERENCE NOTES

5. The name of this archeological site was misspelled in the first edition of the poem. Since then, the poet’s reference to it as well as its published form have maintained this particular spelling.
6. From 1927 to 1943 Neruda served in the following Chilean consulates: Rangoon, Burma, in 1927; Colombo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), in 1928; Batavia, Java, in 1930; Singapore in 1930; Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1933; Barcelona, Spain, in 1934; Madrid from 1935 to 1937; Paris in 1939; and Mexico City from 1940 to 1943. During those sixteen years in service, three interruptions gave him the opportunity to live in Chile for a total of three years: from July 1932 to August 1933; from October 1937 to March 1939; and from January to August 1940.
8. Ibid., p.140.
9. Ibid., p.139.
10. Las Gaviotas, now known as Isla Negra, is located 120 kilometers northwest of Santiago. In 1937 only dirt roads reached the area, thus it took three hours to get there from Santiago. Neruda recalls arriving to Isla Negra on horseback. See P. Neruda, “The House,” in P. Neruda, The House in the Sand (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 1990), p.43.
17. Although Neruda mentions 1939 as the date when he purchased the house, according to an interview with Luz Sobrino (March 8, 1996), that seems to be the official date of purchase; the poet occupied the house in 1938 even before it was completed. See Neruda, Memoirs, p.140. See also E. Mayorga, “Las Casas de Neruda,” Seminario de Titulación [Thesis Seminar], Universidad de Bio Bio, Facultad de Arquitectura, Concepción, 1996, p.79. 18. In these poems Neruda outlined the themes he would later develop in his later book project Canto General. “Winter Ode to the Mapocho River,” “Botany,” “Atacama,” “Ocean,” and “Hymn and Homecoming” are found in Section VII, Canto General de Chile, while “Discoverers of Chile” is found in Section III, The Conquistadores. See Loyola, “Notes,” in Neruda, Obras Completas I, p.1202.
19. In a letter to his sister Laura Reyes, Neruda expressed interest in fixing “the little house” of Isla Negra. Letter from Pablo Neruda to his sister Laura Reyes.

20. Eladio Sobrino purchased a large amount of land in this area for real estate purposes. He subdivided the land into 5,000-silver-meter lots (the minimum size for rural properties), and had three vacation homes designed and built on them. Sobrino kept one of the houses for his family, while the other two were put up for sale. Dr. Raúl Bulnes purchased one, and Neruda purchased the other. The empty lot west of Neruda’s property was sold to Dr. Uribe. See S. Valenzuela, “El museo como casa de placer. Tres bocetos y un proyecto para la fundación Pablo Neruda en Isla Negra,” Tesis Proyectual para el Grado de Arquitecto y Magíster en Arquitectura, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 2000, p.39.

21. Initially, his idea was to return to Chile by September of 1941. See Letter from Pablo Neruda to his sister Laura Reyes, cited in Briones, Pablo Neruda, p.17.


23. “A nivel estilístico el texto restará aislado, sin prosecución, testimoniando las dificultades que estaba encontrando Neruda para dar con el justo tono de su libro.” Loyola, “Notes,” in Neruda, Obras Completas I, p.1202. “America, I Do Not Invoke Your Name in Vain” is section VI of El exilio español en la orilla Latinoamericana, no.5, p.9.

24. This trip is not documented in Neruda’s biographies; however, a postcard dated Antofagasta, May 3, 1943, indicates that Neruda was in Chile around that time. See C 1059/311: Dibuixos i correspondència de P. Neruda, in Arxiu Històric Col·legi d’Arquitectes de Catalunya (Demarcació de Barcelona).

25. Neruda had plans to offer assistance to Spaniards who would contribute to the modernization of Chile. But the instructions from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were clear: “in principle, [neither] intellectuals, professors, nor professionals were wanted.” The Chilean government wanted only people who would contribute to the growth of the country’s agriculture and industry. Therefore, the majority of the Spaniards who arrived in Chile in 1939 (and later in 1940) were “builders, skilled fishermen, experts in paper manufacturing, [and] agronomists.” See P.B. Marín, “El exilio español en la orilla Latino-Americana,” Cuadernillos CEXECI, no.5, p.9. See also V. Teitelboim, Neruda: An Intimate Biography (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), p.235.

26. Prior to Neruda’s commission, in 1941, Rodríguez Arias had designed a house in Santiago for Manuel Ricalde. As in most of his later projects, the construction documents and permit were signed by Esther Durán de Cantín. From 1941 to 1957 he had worked on more than 25 houses, according to his archive at Arxiu Històric Col·legi d’Arquitectes de Catalunya (Demarcació de Barcelona). Most of these were small weekend houses, either on the coast or in the mountains, or small suburban houses in Santiago. For information regarding his mountain vacation houses, see F. González de Canales, “Piedra en la piedra. La arquitectura cordillerana de Germán Rodríguez Arias,” ARQ, no.71 (April 2008), pp.80–84.

27. The project was designed by the Spanish architect Secundino Zuazo.

28. On this area of the site, the slope reaches 42 percent.


30. The back of the paper has the following address printed: Varsovia 24 C Tel Eric. 14-30-28 Mexico D.F., Mexico; the rest is illegible. C 1059/311: Dibuixos i correspondència de P. Neruda, in Arxiu Històric Col·legi d’Arquitectes de Catalunya (Demarcació de Barcelona). During Neruda’s stay in Mexico, he and del Carril, had the following addresses: Hotel Montejo, near Paseo de la Reforma; Calle Revillagigedo; Quinta Rosa María in the neighboring town of Coyocácn; Calle Elba (now Polanco); and finally, Calle Varsovia. See Vidal, Hormiga Pinta Caballos, p.70.

31. The drawing (a plan of the first floor and two elevations), acknowledges Rodríguez Arias’s early partner, the Spanish architect Secundino Zuazo.

32. As built, the addition was shortened by 70 centimeters along the south end and displaced 50 centimeters to the north; thus, the roof occupies a larger area in the interior of the room.

33. In 1941 Neruda and del Carril found outskirts of Santiago, now the district of La Reina, which they purchased while he was consul general in Mexico (1940–1943). Vidal, Hormiga Pinta Caballos, p.70. The remodeling project was commissioned in 1943 to the architect Réné Meza Campbell. The project suited the Neruda-del Carril couple’s needs: a bedroom, a small office, a library and studio for the poet (with shelves for his shell collection); a living and dining room; and a fireplace-theater space. It also fulfilled Neruda’s taste for wood (used in the library) and stone (employed abundantly in the fireplace-theater space). The date of completion is unclear, but it was most likely completed in stages. In his Memoirs, Neruda recalls arriving in Chile and occupying the house and library (to the west of the property): “[t]he end of 1943 I arrived in Santiago . . . I settled down in a house I bought on the installment plan. I piled all my books into this house surrounded by huge trees, and took up the hard life.” Neruda, Memoirs, p.166. What must have taken longer to complete was the living room, dining room, and fireplace area. These spaces of the house were the ones that underwent major changes from the original structure.

34. Neruda was around 1.75 to 1.80 meters tall.

35. T. Lago, Ojos y Oídos: Cerca de Neruda (Santiago: LOM Ediciones, 1999), p.50.

36. Ibid., p.51.

37. See “Carta de Pablo Neruda a Germán Rodríguez Arias, Antofagasta, 1 de marzo de 1945,” C 1059/311: Dibuixos i correspondència de P. Neruda, in Arxiu Històric Col·legi d’Arquitectes de Catalunya (Demarcació de Barcelona).

38. Neruda would repeat this idea of having an east-facing window in the bedroom he had added to the house later.

39. “[P]lantó (es decir, lo hizo Rubén) sonriendo unos cactus floridos en unas piedras grandes que penetran en la sala en construcción. Se veían muy bien, porque aún no hay techo y frente al mar están en su medio natural, pero después, lo más probable es que no vivan encerrados en una habitación.” Lago, Ojos y Oídos, p.51.


41. H. Mantell, I am Pablo Neruda (U.S.: Harold Mantell Inc. [production], Films for the Humanities [distributor], 1967). While later projects by Rodríguez Arias also fall under the category of traditional-modern, in all of them he reveals the materials he uses. In fact, a close look at his designs for vacation houses in Farellones allows us to see that Rodríguez Arias combines wood and stone. Stone walls have no fenestrations, while wood is employed in walls and structural elements (beams, and columns). See F. González de Canales, “Piedra en la piedra,” pp.81,83.

42. This was not a new practice; he had done similarly for his house in Santiago. In a 1978 interview, del Carril recalled: “Pablo vio unas piedras fantásticas en La Reina que eran como verdes: toda la chimenea del living está hecha con esas piedras.” “Pablo
saw some fantastic stones in La Reina that were more or less green: the entire fireplace of the living room is made with these stones.”] J. Marchant Laczano, “Delia del Carril, pasajera de la vida,” Paula, Feb. 14, 1978, p.48.
43. “Cuando llegamos al Tabo, frente a la cocina había un gran montón de piedras ovoidales, grandes, llenas de herrumbres, orín o musgo rojizo que les daban un color ardiente muy particular.” Lago, Ojos y Oídos, p.50.
44. “Me dijo que no importaba, que de todos modos eran muy bonitas para el objeto.” Lago, Ojos y Oídos, p.51.
45. Ibid., p.51.
46. “Porqué no has comprado los vidrios?... Dejé el pedido en la firma conocida? . . . La escalera para subir a la torre está hecha?” See “Carta de Pablo Neruda a Germán Rodríguez Arias, Antofagasta, 1 de marzo de 1945,” C 1959.318: Dibuixos i correspondència de P. Neruda, in Arxiu Històric Col·legi d’Arquitectes de Catalunya (Demarçació de Barcelona).
47. “The Flowers of Punitaqui” was written from 1946 to 1947. This collection of poems constitutes Section XI of Canto General. Loyola, “Notes,” p.1203.
50. A 1947 article highlighted the poet’s collection of manmade and natural objects (most of them Chilean earthenware and sea shells). See “La casa del poeta,” Arquitectura y Construcción, no.10 (September 1947). p.9. 51. For this project he “counted with major help from his companion and sublime photographer Antonio Quintana” [“contaba con la ayuda mayor de mi buen compañero y excelso fotógrafo Antonio Quintana”]. P. Neruda, Las Piedras de Chile (Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, 1961), p.9.
55. Neruda had met José Uriel García previously in 1939 during a brief stop in Lima when returning from France. On that occasion the Chilean poet gave a speech in honor of Uriel García, who had just been elected senator from Cuzco. In 1943 Neruda met with Luis E. Valcárcel and Uriel García in Cuzco. Both Valcárcel and Uriel García played key roles in the development of Cuzco Indigenista movement. In fact, Uriel García had published La Ciudad de los Incas (1924); La Arquitectura Incaica (1924); Cusco Colonial (1924); Guía Histórico Artística del Cusco (1925); and his landmark book El Nuevo Indio (1930), in which he offered a brief description of Machu Picchu. Valcárcel, for his part, had published Cuzco (1924), a guide to the city and nearby archeological sites, including Machu Picchu. According to the catalogue of Neruda’s library (donated to Universidad de Chile in 1954), Neruda owned a copy of Valcárcel’s Cuzco (1942) and one of García’s El Nuevo Indio (1930). See L.E. Valcárcel, Cuzco, 3rd ed. (Lima: Banco de Credito, 1942); and J. Uriel García, El Nuevo Indio, 2nd ed. (Cuzco: H.G. Rozas sucesores, 1937), pp.59–60.
59. “¿Qué les sucedió a sus constructores? ¿Qué había sido de sus habitantes? ¿Qué nos dejaron, excepto la dignidad de la piedra, para darnos noticias de su vida, de sus propósitos, de su desaparición?” Neruda, “Nuestra América es vasta e intricada,” p.4.
60. P. Neruda, “The People,” in Neruda, The House in the Sand, p.47. The text in plain type corresponds to a revised translation of words made by the author of this article.
63. Teitelboim, Neruda, p.260.
64. Ibid., p.262.
65. Ibid., p.258.