

ON WEDNESDAY, APRIL 15, 2009, RDA INAUGURATED AN award to recognize exceptionally gifted architects in the early phase of their professional career. The award, called Spotlight: The Rice Design Alliance Prize, will be given annually and carries a \$ 1,500 cash prize. Honorees must be within their first 15 years of professional practice. A selection committee of architects and academicians considers local, national, and international architects who demonstrate design excellence and promise a great design future.

The first winner, Antón García-Abril (b. Madrid, 1969), is a prominent member of the emerging generation of Spanish architects. He received a master's degree and a doctorate in 1995 and 2000, respectively, from the renowned ETSAM, Madrid's most significant school of architecture.

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Besides teaching at ETSAM, García-Abril has been a visiting professor at the schools of architecture at Cornell University, the University of Texas in Arlington, and the University of Navarra in Pamplona, Spain. Prior to establishing his firm in 1995, he worked in the offices of two of Spain's most celebrated designers: Alberto Campo Baeza and Santiago Calatrava. In 2000 García-Abril changed the name of his firm from "Antón García-Abril" to "Antón García-Abril & Ensemble Studio / *Materia Inorganica*," an emphatic reminder of how much the architect values materials and construction in the critical equation for making architecture.

Few recent practitioners in contemporary architecture have entered their profession with the tectonic confidence and boldness found in García-Abril's sparse yet remarkable works. From the beginning of his independent practice, the architect has created works intent on manifesting the visceral power of materials, often embracing their rawness and abrasiveness. These works – appearing as if chiseled by hand – remind us of the physicality of architecture. The Musical Studies Centre (2002), located in the fabled Galician city of Santiago de Compostela, is a case in point: it probes the awe-inspiring properties of weight, mass, and scale while adding to the city's lineage of granite constructions. In this fortress-like work we find an architect unafraid to mobilize an ancient material to great effect and with surprising freedom, a builder intent on harnessing the virtues of granite for its structural, dramatic, and thermal qualities.

The Hemeroscopium House (2006), the architect's own house built in Las Rozas, a town on the outskirts of Madrid, is a fascinating merger of architecture and engineering – a still life that incorporates large structural and infrastructural fragments as primary compositional devices. The result is a work of dynamic coherence, though its singular pieces might hint otherwise. The fluid, unencumbered layout is an effective contrast to the massive,

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SPOTLIGHT ON ANTÓN GARCÍA-ABRIL

Young Madrid architect recognized by RDA

gravity-defying structural pieces that hover over the site's common platform. A similar contrast is evident when the house is seen amid the traditional houses scattered across the neighboring rolling hills. Although it comprises a highly interrelated set of transparent interior spaces, the García-Abril house expands and contracts to reveal new and surprising connections to its bucolic townscape.

The SGAE Central Offices (2006), another work in Santiago de Compostela, is architecture as urban installation, yet one farthest from the term's transient connotation. The SGAE is a porch-like building whose elongated screen wall is a marvelous concoction of tumbling and irregular granite pieces, all held captive in a resilient dance of weight, light, and gravity. Their fragile equilibrium produces a permanent yet porous wall of unforgettable power.

The architect's most recent and largest work to date is a 24-story tower composed of stacked and rotating musical programs appropriately named Tower of Music. When completed in 2011 it will become the Spanish headquarters for the Boston-based Berklee College of Music. Located on



Hemeroscopium House, Madrid, 2006.

a flat site on the periphery of the Mediterranean city of Valencia, the tower emerges from a two-story translucent plinth where parking and public services have been located. Each incremental floor (delineated by large pre-stressed concrete beams on all sides) further reinforces the compelling vertical presence of the building. The Tower of Music does not shout or whisper, it simply provides ample public spaces from which to view the old city, the harbor, and the sea. It also sits engrossed in the play of sounds emitting from its many chambers.

—Carlos Jiménez



SGAE Central Offices, Santiago de Compostela, 2006.