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Josep Pujiula i Vila

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Jo Farb Hernandez follows the construction and dismantling of Josep Pujula i Vila's labyrinthine cabins

For almost twenty years, a spectacular art environment had been rising alongside a curve in the shallow Fluvià river in northwestern Catalunya, Spain. Nestled among the medieval villages of La Garrotxa, this fantastic sprawling construction at once harmonized and collided with the well-worn stones, deep valleys, and verdant volcanic landscape of the local surroundings. Locally known as a 'wild park' (parc salvatge) or 'wild village' (poblat salvatge), the seven soaring towers, innumerable bridges, shelters, and walkways, and, above all, a labyrinth, 1.5 kilometers long, had all been created by the labor of Josep Pujula i Vila. The entire intricate construction covered more than one hectare of land, and the towers soared some 30 meters high, jauntily capped by Catalan flags and banners. It had been an unaffected open-air sanctuary, a devilishly enjoyable maze, the 'Sagrada Familia of Art Brut,' in an appropriate aesthetic and conceptual reference to one of Spain's most recognizable architectural treasures, Barcelona's cathedral, designed by Antoni Gaudi.

Yet on June 18, 2002, Pujula began the process of dismantling his work, the result of a meeting held the week before with representatives of the Generalitat of Catalunya and the mayor of Argelaguer, the owner of the land upon which Pujula had – illegally – built his masterpiece. The mayor and his family were concerned about public safety, particularly the possibility of visitors being hurt while climbing on the structures. Pujula's wife and daughter shared these concerns. The provincial government's Department of Public Works (MOPU) has also been improving the infrastructure of roads and public buildings throughout the region, and it determined that National Route 260 must be slightly rerouted and widened to eliminate a dangerous curve. Not coincidentally, it will be rerouted directly through Pujula's environment, thus necessitating its demolition.

At the meeting officially confirming the directive to dismantle the monument, there was some discussion about the possibility of preservation. However, this option has been jeopardized by the Department of the Environment's interest in protecting the forested area around the river, and by the electrical company's high-tension wires that stretch across the site. Further complicating any such effort, Pujula could not visualize his work without public participation and interaction; he did not want a

fence around it with people viewing it from afar. In the end, preservation seemed unattainable.

With an almost visceral understanding that it would ultimately be impossible to fight and win the battle with the authorities for the right to preserve his work, Pujula has taken up the simple tools he used for creation and has turned them to destruction. It was an adventure creating the work, he says philosophically but sadly; so too it is an adventure taking it down. And although it is rare for creators of monumental environments to conceptualize the entirety of their labors in advance – Pujula being no exception –

he nevertheless laments that if only he had had another eighteen months, a full and finished 'installation' would have been completed.

Unlike other similar artists who have constructed their monuments to retell local histories, comment on social or political issues, or glorify religious beliefs, Pujula had no initial intent other than to entertain himself and occupy his free time. Born May 31, 1937, Pujula was a metal turner by vocation, working fifty hours a week in a local factory. Married and with a daughter by his late twenties, he was always looking for more excitement and entertainment, although he couched these desires in terms of something he could 'profit by doing.' By this he did not mean something that would bring him monetary rewards, but rather something

HASTA EL ÚLTIMO PALO!



UN GRUPO INTERNACIONAL SE HA CONSTITUIDO Y NO TIENE LA MÍNIMA INTENCIÓN DE DEJAR QUE ESTE MONUMENTO MUNDIAL SEA DESTRUIDO TAN BRUTALMENTE.

www.crol.org/amicscabanes

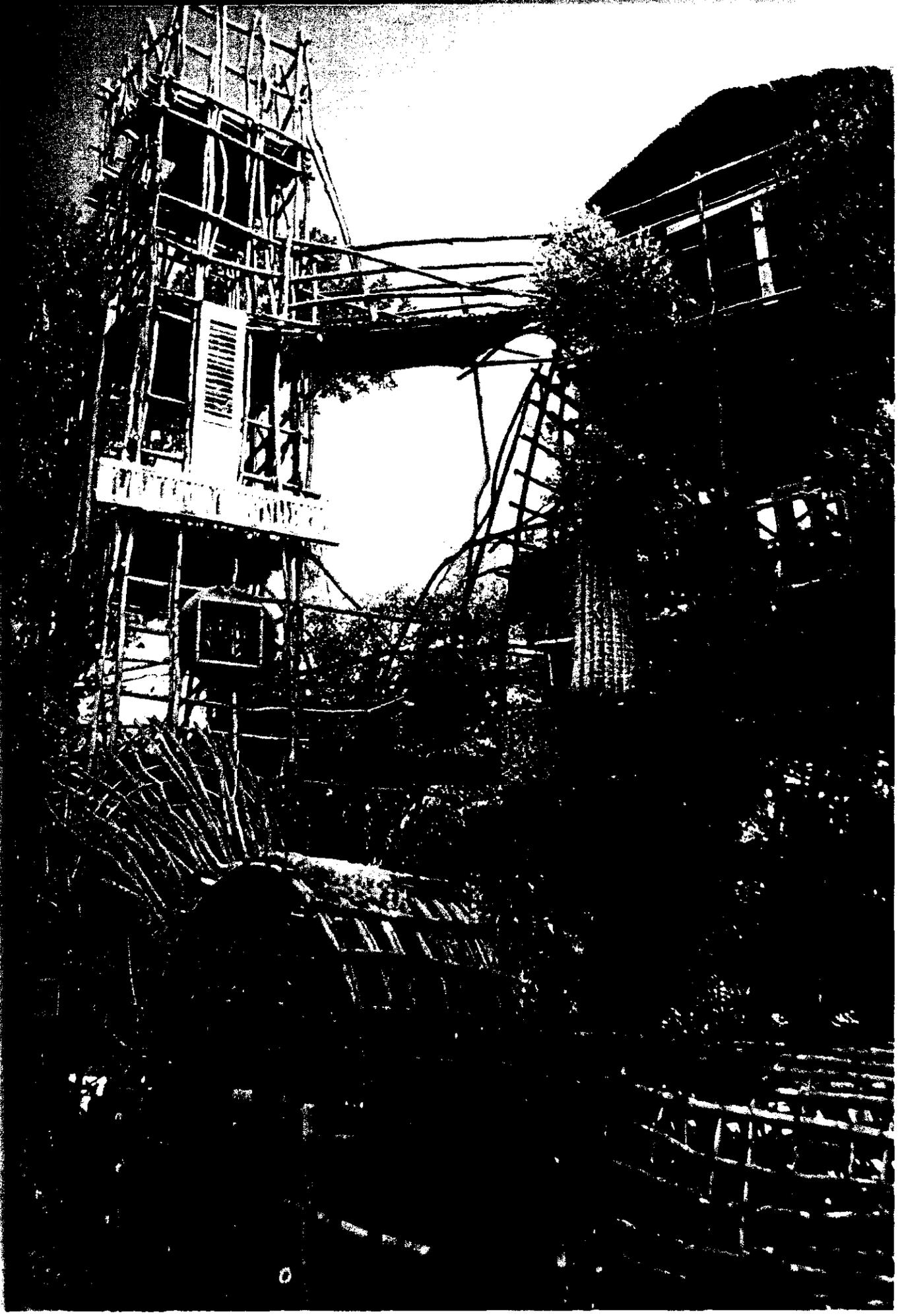
opposite
View from southwest of structure following removal of highest tower levels, August 15, 2002.
above
Posted announcement at site: 'We will fight this demolition 'Until the Last Stick!'

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that would be edifying for him, and, perhaps, his family, friends, and community as well.

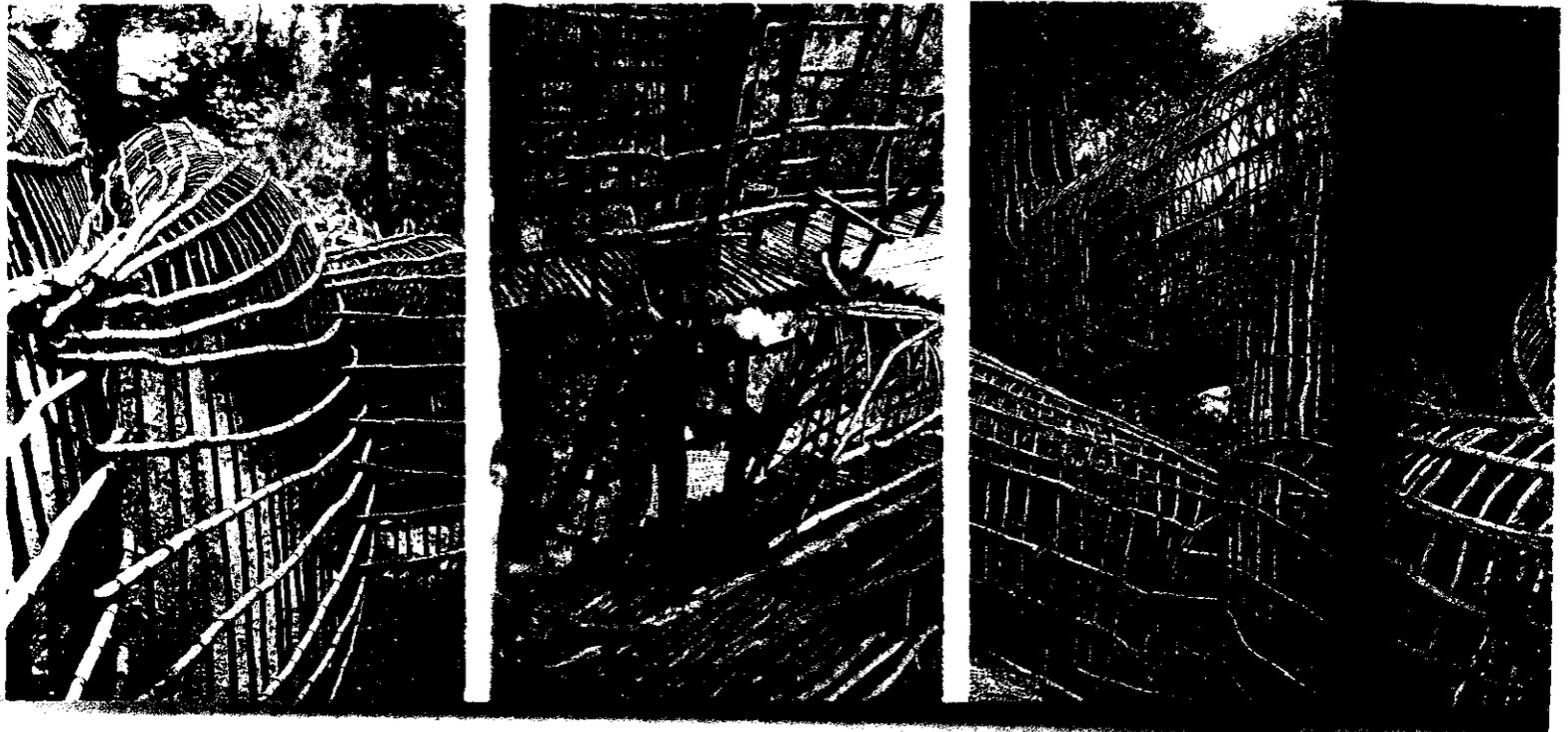
His earliest projects were not architectural or sculptural at all, but involved the creation of a variety of vehicles, including an amphibious Vespa that he could use on land or for floating down the shallow Fluvia river. He particularly enjoyed one special area near the river, near the 'Can Sis Rals' spring, where he had fished and swum as a child. Although this property was not his, he decided he would dam up the spring (with earth, cement, rocks, sticks, and a removable metal cap) in order to have a deeper swimming hole. Ignoring the fact that he was trespassing, he mulled over potential improvements to the area and decided that ducks would add to the charm. But he knew that the ducks would need protection from their natural predators, so he decided to make his first little structure, scavenging wood from the surrounding area and, without sketches, plans, models, or permits, began building a little shed. He then decided it would be nice to have other animals there; within several years he'd added a goat, burros, pigeons, chickens, geese, doves, quail, partridges, and more. Each animal needed its own enclosure, and Pujiula continued to build. Soon the growing number and size of the 'cabins' could be seen from the road, and he began to achieve a degree of local renown. 'It's just my hobby,' he said, 'It pleased me that so many people came, because they liked it and I saw that they found it good...it pleased me to keep constructing and to never stop, and people would donate things to me that I could always use.'

As more and more people began to visit the park, Pujiula started constructing new amenities specifically for the visitors. He added 'houses,' decks, picnic areas, 'hammocks,' diving boards, and more, all from scavenged materials. The visitors' enjoyment of his efforts motivated him to continue to build. Yet along with the increased attendance came associated problems. By the mid-1980s, he began to find garbage left over from people's picnics, along with beer bottles and, more disturbingly, syringes and even human feces, left in the middle of the road. His retreat became a draw for 'undesirables' and vagrants who freely indulged in extended orgies of sex, drugs, and alcohol. Pujiula calculated that over time, more than 300 visitors spent the night in his house without his permission. He realized that, unless he was somehow able to screen out the miscreants, he would be spending all his time policing the area. Although he stressed that he doesn't really care what people do, he was upset when his work was destroyed: some of the vagrants were ripping apart his structures to use the wood to build bonfires. His problems were exacerbated when he was required to demolish the large three-story house that he'd built because it came too close to the high tension wires stretched high over the park. Frustrated and disappointed, he swore he would add no further improvements.

Despite these vows, eight days after he finished the demolition of his house, Pujiula began to work again. He decided to make a tunnel between the hedges to

below, left to right

One of the many 'dead-end' junctures in the 'abyrith,' sealing off a mid-level labyrinth 'dead-end'; three-level covered ladder within the 'abyrith'



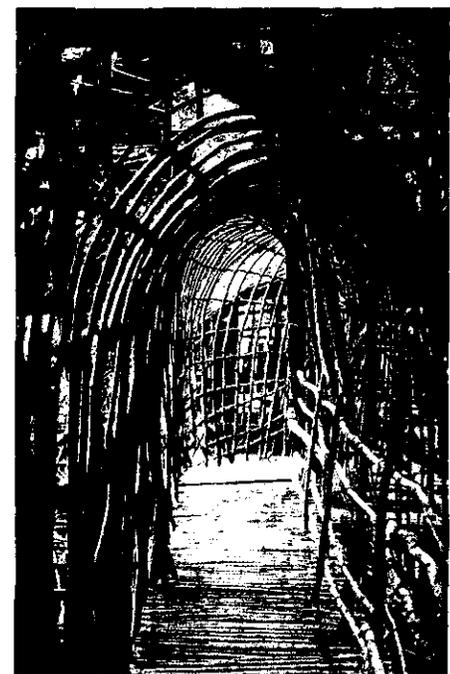
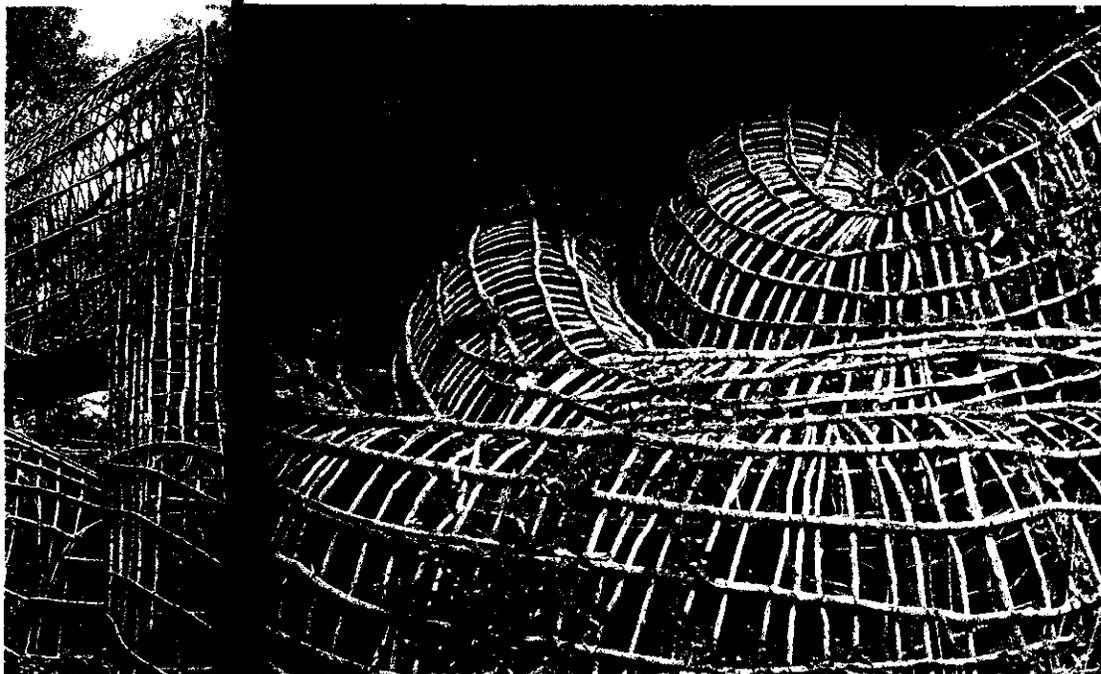
help him get to the area where he had earlier hidden his amphibious Vespa. He gathered long, slim branches of hazelnut, acacia, and willow, bending them and linking them with wires. As the hedge continued to grow up over the entwined branches, it covered the construction and formed a tunnel. He then realized that he could use this technique to help protect his towers from the vagrants. He reasoned that if he made it more difficult for these undesirables to climb the towers, they wouldn't make the effort, and they would go somewhere else to party. He would build a labyrinth with a single entrance and a single exit to get to the heights.

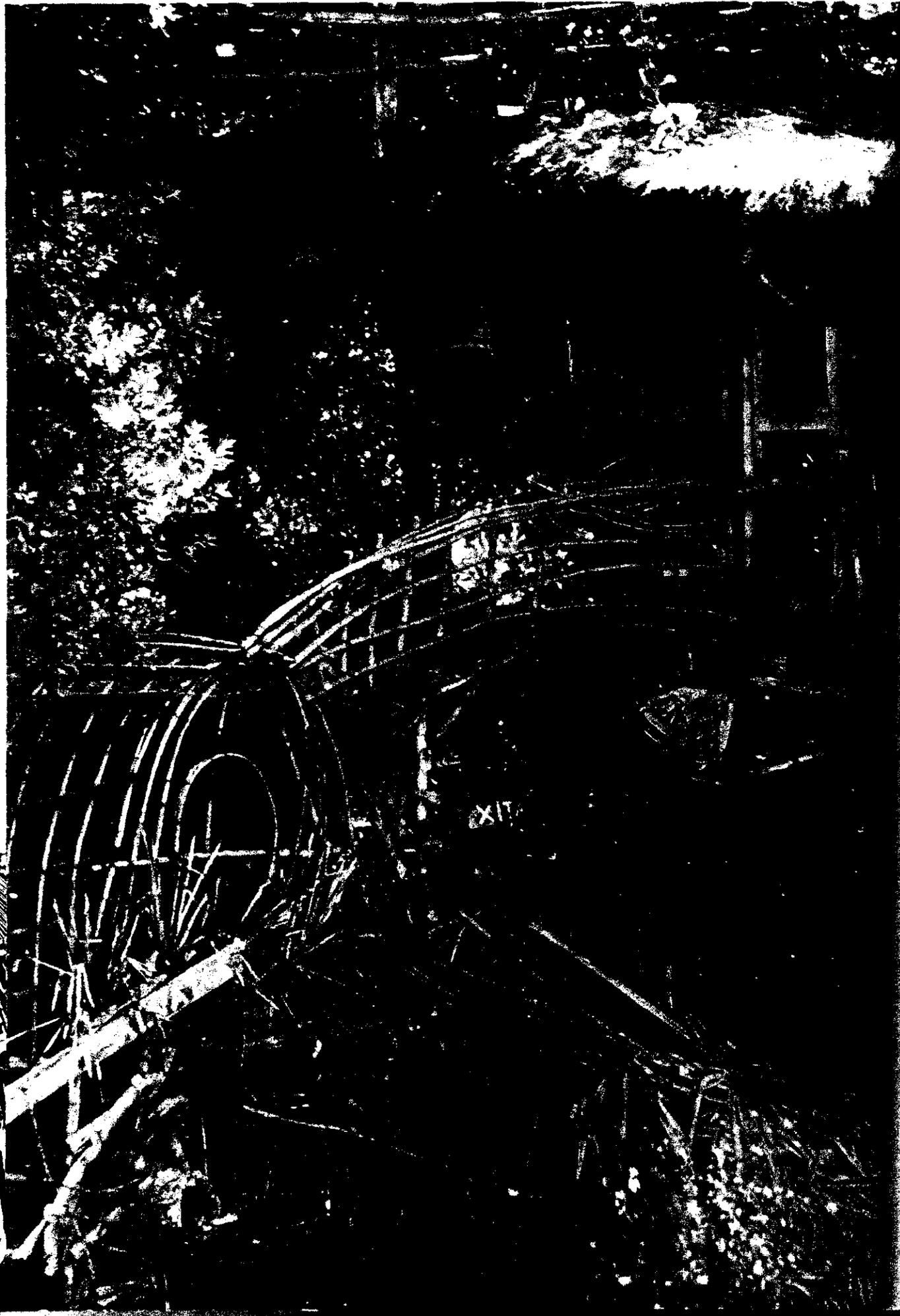
He rather feverishly began adding 'tunnels,' actually woven passageways created by the flexible, curved slender branches of the stream-fed saplings, each completely enclosed and tightly wired to its neighbors. Although most of the paths within the labyrinth are so low that an ordinary-sized adult must crouch over to pass through, in others one can pass fully upright, a result of the wearing down of the pathway after many years of footsteps, or from Pujiula's later work with a pick and shovel to deepen the path and facilitate passage. The labyrinth is complexly intertwined, yet because of the openness of the construction, one can see contiguous pathways, as well as nearby bridges or stairs. The convoluted and intricate nature of the construction, however, often prevents one from figuring out how to reach or approach even adjacent points. The cage-like warrens twist and turn back on themselves, dead-end, or force one up or down ladders and through doorways, folding back on themselves and making it easy to get lost. As he had predicted, 'normal' people really enjoyed the challenge of making it more difficult to reach the towers (only about one in twenty were able to do so), and the druggies didn't have the inclination to exert that much energy to find the right access path. (Pujiula himself had his own secret way of climbing to the top, so that he didn't need to pass through the labyrinth in order to reach the towers.)

With his towers more secured by the obstacle of the labyrinth, he returned once more to the heights, building a fifth, sixth, and seventh tower. Covered walkways were constructed at a height of some 20-25 meters to provide access between the highest points, and the towers were ornamented and finessed with found objects and gifts. The entire structure rose high above the supporting trees, providing a fine view of the surrounding foothills of the Pyrenees. And despite the inherently ephemeral nature of wood, the acacia branches remained strong, even those that had been in the mountains' winds, rain, sun, and occasionally even snow for almost thirty years. Pujiula's structures were sturdily built, and as he climbed through his work daily, he was always pushing and prodding it, checking for weakness and decay. If he detected problems, he returned later to add reinforcements for strength and support.

As I write, Pujiula is working every day to dismantle the structure. He started with only his hand-saw, wire clippers, and hammer, but soon he brought a pick-axe and chain saw to speed up the process. Because of the rising opposition from

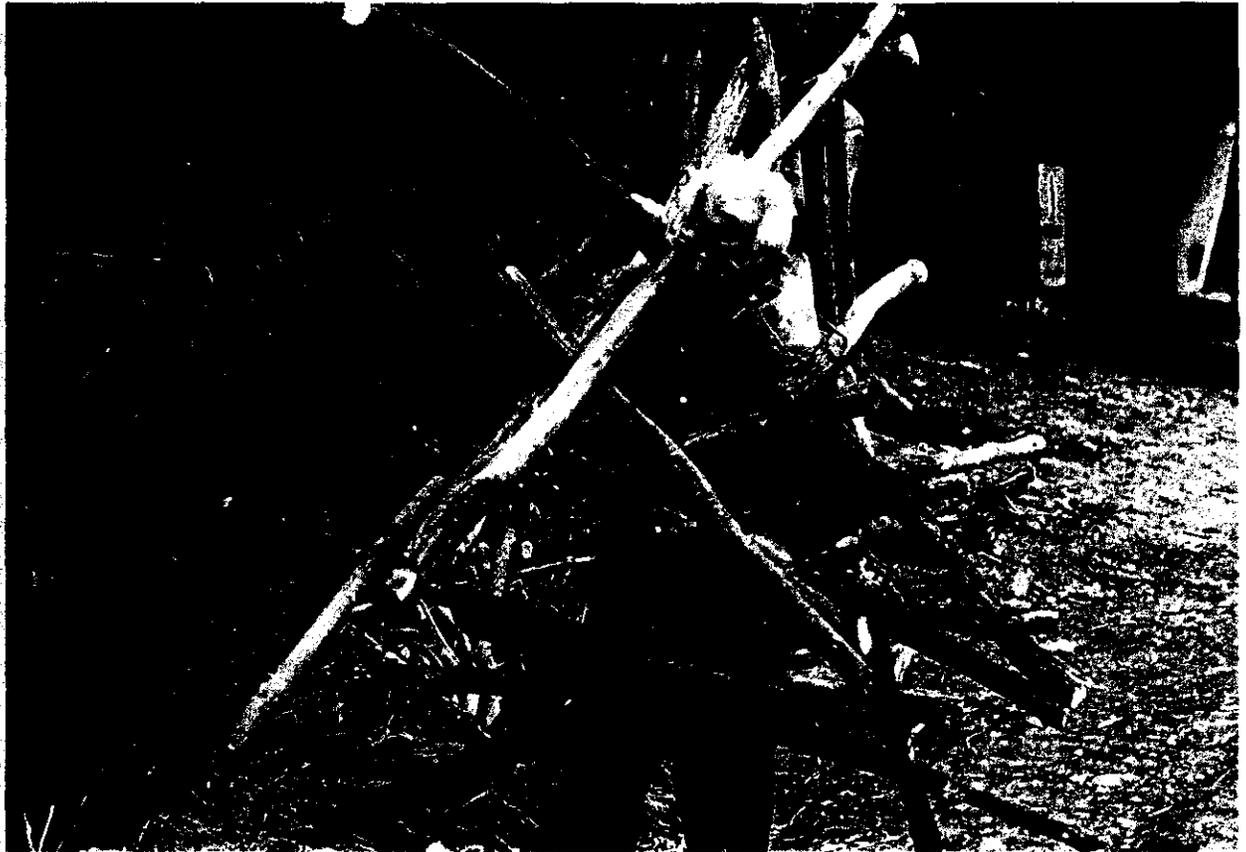
below left
Eastern side of the
labyrinth
below right
Interior view through a
passage of the labyrinth.





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above
Pujiula removing debris from towers to bonfire site.

opposite
Lower north side of structure prior to any demolition, June 2002. All photos Jo Farb Hernandez.

visitors internationally to the demolition, he is being careful to dismantle it 'gracefully,' hoping that at least some portion of his monumental work will be able to be saved.

As he cuts, he tosses the large sections of the woven wooden labyrinth, the towers, the decks, and ladders over the side to the ravine below. From there, he drags them by hand up to the main level, pulling, dragging, or carrying them on his back. The first week of the demolition he had cordoned off the area with plastic police tape, but it had no effect on the legions of visitors who still come to the site daily. As more sections were cut down, he began to encircle the remaining structure with a new fence built from the dismantled pieces. However, even this fence of 'discards,' some 6-8 feet high in some places, is not preventing visitors from entering the area and continuing to climb into or onto the structure. Pujiula works early in the morning. By midday, when most visitors or passersby begin to arrive, he quits, not wanting to police the area, but also not wanting to have to worry about hitting a visitor as he tosses the pieces below.

An ad-hoc organization has been formed, the Amics de les Cabanes – the friends of the cabins – with a new website to advertise the demolition and request international support for

opposition to the removal of Pujiula's work: www.crol.org/amicscabanes. We have solicited and are receiving letters voicing opposition to the destruction from all over the world, and these are being forwarded to the authorities in the regional provincial capital of Girona, as well as to the village mayor. Yet despite this attention, it is unlikely that this spectacular structure will be saved, resulting in the loss of yet another graceful and idiosyncratic artistic treasure of international importance. Pujiula's masterpiece at the Font de Can Sis Rals was at least partially inspired by public response to his work; how ironic that the fact that people visit the site is being used as an excuse to destroy it. And further, how ironic that in the year that Spain is celebrating the genius of Gaudi, the work of another Catalan architectural innovator should be demolished in the name of progress. ☹

This article is excerpted from a book on Spanish traditional artists to be published by the University Press of Mississippi.

Jo Farb Hernandez, curator, folklorist and author, has studied and documented art environments since the mid-1970s and written extensively on such artists as A.G. Rizzoli. Formerly President of the California Association of Museums, she is currently Director of the Thompson Gallery in the School of Art and Design at San Jose State University.