

THE DAY THAT MIES VISITED SOTA

On the Maravillas Gymnasium in Madrid, by Alejandro de la Sota

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It was that hot summer of '65. Mies Van der Rohe had greatly enjoyed that ideal architecture that is the Crystal Palace in the Casa de Campo of Madrid by Asis Cabrero, the day before. And with the golden landscape of Madrid's skyline on his retina, we had taken him to dinner at "Salvador." For the bulls and for the fish. There the maestro enjoyed a splendid breaded hake accompanied by Spain's best red wine, a Vega Sicilia '53, disregarding the norm.

Truly, this trip to Spain in the summer of '65, which we later turned into myth, was amazing to him, who by then believed that neither contemporary architecture that wasn't his own was capable of moving him, nor that a wine which wasn't his blond Riesling could raise him on high.

That morning we had picked him up late from the Suecia Hotel, around eleven, nine according to the sun, when it was already a little higher. Almost without speaking, we took him directly to the Maravillas Gymnasium by Alejandro de la Sota. We arrived by car from behind, from the Guadalquivir street. We entered directly because Sabine with Germanic efficiency had already spoken with the friars and had arranged everything. We crossed, with an impassive Mies, through the pious horrors of the old building, to finally disembark into the Gymnasium.

Mies Van der Rohe remained in a sonorous silence. We disappeared and from the shadow were privileged spectators, secret witnesses of this story. The stony silence of this "maestro of maestros" was marked by the sound of his steps on the wooden floor. Arriving at the back, he remained upright leaning against the western wall. From his right, from on high, light flooded the impressive space. The sun, in torrents entered as only it there and then could. With such perfect intensity that the illuminated areas were more brilliant and clear than ever, and the shadows, in unusual depth. The light structure of overwhelming logic deeply touched this great architect.

Mies couldn't, and didn't have to, hide his emotion. It was as if everything which he had attempted and achieved in his life was there summarized. How could anyone else share his simple secret? Who was this David who dared to strike so accurately this Goliath of Architecture? Of course, just as he had so decidedly insisted on demonstrating and had demonstrated, the qualities of continuous space, horizontal space swept by horizontal light, he had also experimented with light from above. As he had well learned from Schinkel. And that here and now he saw so clearly and obviously.

Who was this Sota who thus spoke to him, one to one? This master of masters didn't know then that this little-big architect was, in the words of Kenneth Frampton, the Spanish master by excellence. Neither could he

imagine that twenty five years later, that the work of this Spanish architect would be exhibited and applauded in Zürich, beneath the wings of Semper, from whom Mies had learned so much. And so things come full circle.

Mies stood like that almost half an hour. Which for him was only a glorious instant, profoundly moving. On the return trip to the hotel, with few words, he expressed his admiration for this architect, Sota, capable of having built such a clear idea. Destiny had it that Sota wasn't in Madrid during those few days. And Mies was left with the interest to meet him, unable to express his admiration. But the visit was worthwhile. The Maravillas Gymnasium, so close to Mies yet without appearing so, is as William Curtis has pointed out, the most significant work of contemporary Spanish Architecture.

And, what had Sota made? How could we explain his unquestionable talent? He had explained to architects how to do almost everything with almost nothing. To look as that Little Prince through that small hole where everything is possible. To dream, and to build these dreams. The "maestro" fascinatingly, so spoke, in the initiation of those first classes where some of us were stung by that from which we can never free ourselves.

Almost without wanting to, he carried until now the staff with which without aspiring to, he has guided new generations of Spanish architects. Almost without speaking, but saying so much, with the rigor and the depth of his work, with measured quantity but with abundant quality. Almost without being in the School of Architecture, but efficiently exercising a continuous and profound education from his particular "Sota-esque" chair. From his luminously austere vault in Breton de los Herreros street, where all of us continued going to drink.

Far from unnecessary technologies but utilizing the most advanced techniques well assimilated and refined to the maximum. Combining this with his proverbial irony also in the use of materials. Without proposing contaminating forms, but erecting impressive built ideas. With a subtle reticence in his forms. When I gave him a book by the complete Spanish poet Juan Antonio Marin, "These forms are silent, they are alcohol, wasted silver, water spilled in puddles", he only smiled.

Alejandro de la Sota is there, in front of all architects, smiling so silently. With his simple simplicity. With his lessons of honesty and silence. With his refinement. Sota continued until yesterday, also in the physical sense, with this profound elegance, with this distinction which always characterized him. Sabine always said that he reminded her enormously of Alfredo Mayo, forever the gentleman of a certain type of postwar Spanish cinema.

As someone has already pointed out about Alejandro de la Sota: "His Architecture possesses that extreme elegance of the precise gesture, of the exact phrase that so accurately touches silence. The silence of his work and of his personality which possesses the difficult capacity to fascinate." To fascinate even Mies Van der Rohe himself.