

BALD BEAUTY

On de Alejandro de la Sota

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"One tires of seeing how the Beauty and Grace of things (perhaps they are the same) are persecuted with added decoration, knowing that the secret is not there. My unforgettable friend Jose Antonio Coderch used to say that if the most absolute Beauty is like a precious bald head (Nefertiti for example) it is necessary to have pulled out hair by hair, lock by lock, with the pain of tearing out each of them, one by one. Painfully we must tear from our works the hairs which impide us from achieving their simple, simple end. This desire, accompanied by something similar, could be a place to start this book: simple simplicity."

These expressive words of the Spanish architect Alejandro de la Sota (Pontevedra 1913) close the book about his work (Pronaos Ed. Madrid 1990) and precisely define the position of this true maestro to architecture and life itself.

His magistry finally recognized in our country in these last years (Gold Medal for Merit in the Beaux Arts in 1986 and Gold Medal of Architecture from the Greater Council of Architects of Spain in 1988) is now beeing recognized internationally.

The maestro who was unjustly rejected by the Spanish University in a polemical public entrance examination (where have the winners gone adrift?) is now justly valued by the europeans with a magnificent exhibition in the very center of one of the most international cities of the old continent: Zürich. Le Corbusier's homeland applauding Sota.

The exhibition is an improved and augmented version of the same which had been in Harvard and later Madrid. A clear retrospective of Sota's work through large photographs and models interspersed with abundant documentation of plans and original drawings, finishing in a small area which contains some of the furniture designed with almost nothing, by Sota. All of this presiding over the great central hall of the building which Gotfried Semper made, a century ago, for the Polytechnic School of Zürich, in tune with Wagner's music.

And with other music, more silent, the works of the Spanish maestro serenely and quietly unfold before the astonished eyes of those europeans. I can swear, and not only from the visit with my students of the E.T.H., that the exhibition was always full of people. And thus, step by step, we pass from the rational naturality of the Sevillian town of Esquivel (1955) to the sober cubisme (the age of plasticism) of the new town of Fuencarral in Madrid (1955). Or from the tense rationality of the TABSA workshop in Barajas

(1957) to the primitive strength of the renovated, with the efficient help of Jose Llinas, Civil Government building in Tarragona (1954-1957).

An obligatory pause is obligated before an enormous colored image of that fascinating and precise idea (light and construction) that is the Gymnasium of the Maravillas School in Madrid (1961) about which William Curtis has recently published a splendid and analytical text where he underlines the intellectual rigor and the poetic depth of Sota's paradigmatic work.

Continuing this course with those three glass boxes of extreme delicacy which are the unbuilt projects for a Parish Center in Vitoria (1957), the offices for Bankunion in Madrid (1970) and the offices for Aviaco, also in Madrid (1957).

And the stone housing in Salamanca (1963) and the Cesar Carlos University Residence (1976) and the Post Office in Leon (1981) and the Spanish Embassy in Paris, etc.

And what does Sota's architecture have to produce such strong impact on European architects now?. Is Sota's architecture what one would expect as "authentically Spanish", a bullfighter's architecture of grand gestures and expressive manners, appropriate in a bullring? Nothing could be further from the quiet simplicity of the maestro.

Sota's architecture, like that of Mies Van der Rohe or Arne Jacobsen (to quote the German and the Dane so that you may understand) has that extreme elegance of the precise gesture of the exact phrase that so accurately touches silence. The silence of his work and his personality which possess the difficult capacity to fascinate. So close to poetry, to a poetic breathe, to a hushed music.

Spaniards, Spanish architects, have almost always interpreted this conceptual precision and this Sota's formal asceticism as something not quite vernacular but internationalizing, as coming from without.

Europeans, European architects, have almost always interpreted, this clarity of ideas and this simplicity of forms as something specific to the sobriety and austerity of the Spanish. The other side of the coin whose bullfighter tail most describes us. They, who expected to find a Spanish bullfighter architect, oh Bofill!, can not recover from their surprise before such great simplicity. And in their astonishment before that bald beauty of Sota's architecture, their admiration increases.

And Alejandro de la Sota, bravo! bravo!, more than one or the other, and far from formalism or unlooked for asceticism, speaks with words and projects of simple simplicity.

Sota's architecture, like that of Luis Barragan or Sigurd Lewerentz (to cite the mexican and the swede so that you may continue understanding) possesses that difficult naturality of humble materials which adequately placed are capable of suggesting unlooked for qualities. Just as when the placement of the precise word produces in us a poetic vibration.

Many contemporary european architects use the most and the least new materials as an alibi (they speak of technology and industrial materials) for their shameless exhibitionism of the most curious textures and colors, in praise of a pseudo-technological exoticism to fill many Spanish and foreign architectural magazines with their images. Punched tin unfolded and corrugated, silk-screened glass, and rusted corten-steel become the main characters when light and space are forgotten.

Some contemporary Spanish architects, in the image and likeness of them, who are more inclined towards cinematographic effects than architectural permanence, and perhaps with a plausible desire to find a place in those publications, also are immersed in this current of pseudotechnological exoticism.

And Alejandro de la Sota, simple simplicity!, more than one or the other, and far from exhibitionism and personal protagonism, uses the most advanced materials with unlooked for naturality.

While others, almost all of them, understand architecture like bullfighting they so move (with grand gestures and expressive manners) Sota serenely passes amongst the bulls which give way before him.

While others, almost all of them, shake their materials feeling modern in showing them (with aluminium here, fiberglass there, tin here, corrugated steel there), Sota absent mindedly passes, besides them, with his simple materials at hand.

While others, almost all of them, construct and deconstruct forms, depending on the fashion and modernize and postmodernize styles, Sota slowly retires to the other bank, maliciously grinning and slowly slowly, builds ideas for eternity. Hairless ideas of a bald and permanent beauty.