

VOLCANIC BEAUTY

On Javier Sáenz de Oíza

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Like a volcano. Sáenz de Oíza's architecture is like one of the most beautiful spectacles nature has to offer. Like a volcano, when just before it explodes, the earth starts to tremble, to beat, and palpitate with primal force. Or when, once the fire has been vomited, the burning tongue of magma ravages the mountainsides and valleys. That is what Saenz de Oíza's architecture is like: burning, cosmic, telluric. Like a volcano.

If to represent Alejandro de la Sota's Architecture, we turn to the crystalline head of Nefertiti as an image of unfading beauty, to capture Oíza's Architecture, we must refer to Medusa's Gorgon-like head: imposing, thunderous, dreadful.

It is not that the labels which have periodically been applied to the master fall off or come lose: his work wears them away. It destroys them because no label is capable of withstanding his sulphuric architecture, of such architectural intensity and such a will to architecture.

And if to the notes of Bach, Sota's silent music succeeds in taming the wild beasts of Form and silencing them, Oíza's tremendous music, to a score by Wagner, devours Form to reveal it later in the most personal and expressive accents.

How else could we explain or try to analyze this Architecture which runs through our fingers like brilliant mercury, escaping rebelliously and contradicting any diagnosis.

RADICAL RADICAL

Oíza's Architecture, like his life, is a radical rosary of radical beads. As radical as the best Architecture demands.

The radical rationalism of his chapel of Santiago. The radical expressionism of his Talavera house. The radical organicism of his Torres Blancas building of a non-existent utopian whiteness. The radical and effective technology of the Banco de Bilbao. The radical magnetic presence of his auditorium in Santander. The radical oceanic transparency of his museum in Las Palmas. The radical walled conclusion of his housing complex on the M-30 highway in Madrid. The radical Roman fort of his Triana de Sevilla. The radical renascent inspiration of his Madrid Fairgrounds. Oíza's radical radicalism.

He always convinces us by his own conviction, seasoned with his torrential style, sprinkled with an unbelievable self-distain that belies a true humility.

Overwhelming fury, uncontainable waterfall, erupting volcano. Illustrious fecund architect: fertile in clarifying ideas and abundant in powerful forms. It would be impossible to analyze all of his works, from any point of view. Instead, I will attempt a curious analysis of two of them, perhaps the most interesting, using the images of the Crater and the Geode as corresponding to his volcanic architecture.

BABELIC CRATERS

Walls torn down and the technology allowing full constructive verticality raised in their place, contemporary Architecture poses a question which remains unanswered even today: How should the vertical meet the horizontal of the earth's plane? Under what concepts should Architecture resolve this crucial encounter between the concentrated accumulation of gravitational loads with the ground on which it must spread out, rest and be supported?

The architect then intones a response as personal as it is universal. Oíza, whose Babelic dream-come-true would be to erect the most beautiful tower of the third millennium (I already know that for such a task he keeps Calvino's book under his pillow), had already figured out the answer to this requirement, and twice in a row, better than anyone else. Using the crater as the answer.

The primitive vertical architectures, including the first skyscrapers, followed the logic of constructing a wider base. So that the base works with the column. Adolf Loos would take this to its ultimate consequences in his magnificent proposal for the Chicago Tribune in 1922.

Later and not deigning to answer, more recent architecture has transferred this encounter to the nether regions, to the subsoil, in order not to show it on the ground plane. Then they put the lid on it, as if it were nothing. Like Foster in Hong Kong, curious symbol of our dubious age this slipping silently out the back.

Oíza, affirmative and challenging, charges against the earth, breaking it up with Jupiter-flung thunderbolts of gravity. And he creates a beautiful crater which he then staunches, accentuating it to express clearly the nature of this powerful encounter. The crater of the Torres Blancas, of the Banco de Bilbao, each one with its own language, is irrefutable proof of his attitude. The master's sage response. Can anyone imagine the fantastic crater through which his future Tower of Babel will emerge from the earth?

I cannot help but recall a memorable visit Kenneth Frampton made to Madrid, which involved Oíza's Banco de Bilbao. The then Chairman of Columbia had been tied up in a boring congress on the unsolvable problems of the big city. And once in Madrid, they took him around, to learn who knows what, through the thousands of developments known as "social" or low and middle-income housing. Once we'd completed our chores, he asked me to show him two things: the Goya paintings in the Prado Museum and Oíza's Banco de Bilbao. It's easy to imagine his pleasure at the Prado, but the most pleasant surprise was his sense of wonder when he saw Oíza's tower. He walked around the ferric obelisk, exclaiming the whole time "Amazing, amazing!" He couldn't repress a stream of fervent praise. Once again, it is the people who come from abroad who recognize and admire what those within are determined so boorishly to undervalue. In addition to solving the problem of the encounter by means of the crater, Oíza's Banco de Bilbao stands out in contemporary Architecture as an exemplary tower, with an original structural invention that answers all of the numerous mechanical problems to be found there. With a terse skin that, like a holy chameleon, changes appearance over the course of a day and through the seasons. From the steely and icy gray of winter to the warm gold, like honey, of autumn. From its serene whitish tone in the rain to its radiant blue in bright sunlight. An offshoot of that visit was the inclusion of this building, with an image, in the Frampton's widely read Critical History of Modern Architecture.

LIKE A GEODE

And if his well-built towers are radical and beautiful and well set in their foundations, Oíza's housing complex on the M-30 highway is no less so. Like a Geode of volcanic beauty. The splendid wall is the pride of its inhabitants who, more sensibly than those who have criticized it, keep it impeccable, proud to be the possessors of something important. The housing complex of the M-30 is a piece of first-rate architecture. A constructed idea. His proposal is more than reasonable, to close the residences against the chaos, noise and pollution and to open them to the air, the sunshine and the calm. A masterpiece by a master for a society still incapable of understanding them in its uncouth ignorance. Like throwing pearls to swine. Like a Geode that guards its unique wealth as it protects it.

THE SUN AND THE STARS

If Oíza were American, or Italian or French, his genius would be known worldwide. But this country continues to be "different". Isn't it curious that at this point in time, there still isn't a single book written on a figure the stature

of Oíza? Of as much or greater stature than any of the stars that make up this almost cinematographic firmament by which current architecture is artificially illuminated. But we already know that Architecture is only possible with light, with sunlight. I believe the moment has come and the recent recognitions on a social level, such as the Principe de Asturias Prize, could prompt official organisms (read Architects Associations or the Ministry of Culture or the School of Architecture) to intervene in the matter.

Petrified fire, devastating force, contained passion: all images reflecting the many facets of an architect, Oíza, and his polymorphic Architecture.

When first sighting the earth's globe from his diabolical artifact, the astronaut Neil Armstrong exclaimed, "I am looking at the Earth from here. It is big, brilliant and beautiful." Big, brilliant and beautiful, cosmic like the Earth: that is what Sáenz de Oíza's Architecture is.