

**THIS IS THE BOX**

**About Javier Carvajal**

PUBLISHED IN

Congreso en la U. de Navarra en honor de Carvajal, 1998

La huella de un maestro. Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona, 2010

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About Javier Carvajal

"Everything has already been said, but since no one listens, it is necessary to start continuously." A well-known Spanish sculptor, Angel Ferrant, wrote these words that here come just as well. I have already written so much about Javier Carvajal. First in A+U, then in Casabella and later in El País. Then came the texts for Documentos, the COAM book and then the University of Palermo's widely distributed book. And on so many occasions I have spoken and written about Javier Carvajal. Well, it will be necessary to repeat things a thousand times so that they find out.

Like books. You read a novel resting, with the book in your lap. But you almost never study with the book in that position. To study, the book is always on the table. So today, I would like to start studying, more than just reading, the book of architecture by Javier Carvajal on the table.

### ACADEMIC YEAR

In the old competitions for the professorship of Projects, it was the custom of the court to request from the candidate, in the last exercise, the analysis of a work of architecture. For the sake of academic brilliance, the candidate used to destroy the piece by understanding the analysis, the critique, as an attempt to find the existing or figurative defects in order to sharply point them out and thus look divine. The method was enormously effective.

On this occasion, although very different from that one, I have thought it more than appropriate to make, as if it were one of those exercises, the analysis of a work of his, his first work, his opera prima.

Not in vain Carvajal always defended the projectual creation as true research work. What now in the forums that have to rule on the future professors is still under discussion, when it comes to value the research character that has the architectural project. Which it is when the architecture is first class.

Javier Carvajal always defended that the project, or a built work, was a possible subject for a doctoral thesis. And in the same line, he made me do so, as a research work for the corresponding exercise of oppositions to the professorship of Projects.

### THIS IS THE BOX

-This one is too old. I want a lamb that will live a long time.

Then, impatient, as I was in a hurry to start disassembling my engine, I scribbled this drawing:

And I left him:

-This is the box. The lamb you want is inside.

Well, I see Javier Carvajal's first building as this fascinating box. As in this box with holes of The Little Prince of Saint-Exupéry so dear and quoted by our architect is contained, so I see it, with great clarity: all the architecture of Javier Carvajal. And that is why I have dared to propose it here today.

Psychologists say that in the first years of a child's life, on his innocent "tabula rasa" are imprinted all the character traits that he will later develop as a person throughout his life. I understand that in Carvajal's first work are already latent all the features of the architecture that he has done, does and will do so brilliantly throughout his life.

If one had to look for fundamental pieces of contemporary architecture in Barcelona, one has no choice but to go to Mies Van der Rohe with his masterful pavilion, to Sert with his houses on Muntaner Street where, as a coincidence of life, Carvajal himself came to live, and to Carvajal, a native of Barcelona, with the School of Higher Commercial Studies, which is the work we are going to analyze, won in competition, recently arrived after his passionate stay in Rome as a boarder at the Academy of Spain.

The time that works wonders, makes that without ever having been rehabilitated and fortunately the building, it has this patina that accentuates the strength of its impressive presence. Impressive not only for the rotundity of its well agreed volumes, but above all for its overwhelming logic.

When Mies Van der Rohe was told that his architecture was "interesting", he responded angrily: "I don't want my architecture to be interesting, I want it to be good!" Well, the architecture of the Carvajal building on Barcelona's Diagonal is good, very good.

And let's move on to analyze it.

## CONTEXT

The building is present to the city as a rotund piece, of great strength, of marked horizontality. And despite its large dimensions, it appears with extreme lightness emerging on a powerful stone base. What Kenneth Frampton, with the help of Gotfried Semper, would properly call here a tectonic piece perched on a stereotomic base. The light, open, luminous tectonic element rests on the heavy, closed, dark stereotomic element. The hut over the cave.

It is no coincidence to allude here to the fact that this type of dialectical operation, of contrast, will be constant in many of Carvajal's works. To speak of a very similar operation, although with very different forms, I will point out the hotel in Seville. I still remember an attractive model in his studio, where that base was carved in wood as if bitten off, so that those white cylinders, already very light and precise, could emerge.

Facing the city floor, the intense traffic of Barcelona's Diagonal, the building will be closed in powerful stone volumes. Facing the sky, to the eyes of the city, the building will open fully glazed with great sincerity and constructive clarity, overlooking the Diagonal as if it were the edge of a river.

The linearity that will later be resolved in logical functional schemes, and the frontality that will bring the appropriate light to these spaces, are architectural mechanisms that are used to the full in this piece. The palm trees are the perfect counterpoint to accentuate the horizontality of the operation.

## FUNCTION

Javier Carvajal has always been a convinced functionalist. And here too. And he does it with an almost pedagogical, almost scholastic sense. Distinguishing, like Kahn, between servant parts and served parts. Between more public parts and more private parts.

It thus resolves the more public functions on the first floors, those of the stereotomic base. The classrooms, many of them with only zenithal lighting, the conference room with the ramp, the cafeteria, all articulated and well articulated by a lobby that is after all a common space. There, as he so often defends, the space flows, is continuous, transparent, to best fulfill its relational function.

The upper floors, offices and seminars that the program called for in large numbers, are resolved in the large linear piece, in the box, in what the French call a "barre" building, with a classic comb scheme that works perfectly.

## SPACE

Of the many spatial sequences that can be analyzed in this building, I would like to highlight, logically, the lobby both for its handling in plan and for its section.

On the ground floor, where non-orthogonal walls are already introduced, above a latent axuality, not in vain the series of pillars coming from above appears exempt, the space is handled with great freedom. The opacity of the volumes of the classrooms that are accessed from it is more than amply compensated by an opening to courtyards with a Miesian and oriental aroma that attract a very special light. Continuity and transparency, so characteristic of the Modern Movement, are present there.

But I would like to put even more emphasis on the operation of the wise high placement of the main plane, the piano nobile. It is raised high enough to be noticed. Again Mies, again the podium. Again Greece, again the stylobate. That more than subtle elevation, the Farnsworth, the Barcelona pavilion give that horizontal plane a buoyancy that makes one understand again the importance of those mechanisms so typical of architecture. So easy to understand and of which it seems that many architects are not aware.

## STRUCTURE AND CONSTRUCTION

As it could not be less, the structure marks here from the first moment the spatial rhythm of the building. It orders it. It transmits, as we have repeated so many times, not only gravity to the earth but above all order to the space. The structure that, curiously, will later remain silent in many of Carvajal's works, rises here as the protagonist of the spatial order that the architect establishes.

The construction of the exposed reinforced concrete, in its naked state, was impeccable. And the carpentries, divided according to Le Corbusier's fenestration canons, not only distinguished the functions of looking, illuminating, ventilating, cleaning and protecting, but also in their layout they recovered the squaring of the circle. For the openings of the structure, logically, were not square, virtually recovering this squareness in the carpentry. And if we return again to the Pamplona library, here the openings are already perfect squares.

## REFERENCES

Speaking of this building Carvajal said that it was "of a rationalism with more echoes of Terragni than of the other masters. And echoes of the Barcelona rationalism of GATCPAC". And although it is evident that the best Terragni of the Casa del Fascio, or the Corbusier of the Cité Refuge in Paris, or so many others, what is being built there is something original, new and different. Far from formal influences I would speak in Carvajal and also in this building of his ability to synthesize, or rather distillation of a masterful architect who makes and summarizes the architecture of his time.

## IDEA

And although in the case of the author the explanation of the idea must be the starting point of the analysis, in the case of the critic it must emerge at the end as a conclusion.

Visually, the building appears to me as if lying down, reclining, contemplating the city that runs at its feet. With the serenity that horizontality provides. In the way that in painting the Venus or the Majas of the hand of Titian, Velázquez or Goya do. Frontal, displaying their whole being. The Diagonal building shows it all.

## CONCLUSION

And orderly analyzed its perfect relationship with the context, its orderly structure and its logical construction, its spatial fluidity and its tight compliance with the function, Javier Carvajal's building on the Diagonal in Barcelona is shown as a masterpiece. And it is understood that with that of Mies Van der Rohe and Sert, I can only recommend it to my architect friends when they go to Barcelona.

I have already told and written many times the anecdote of Peter Eisenman in his visit to Barcelona in 1979 as a prelude to his lectures in Madrid, invited precisely by Carvajal, where he asked whose was that impressive piece of Barcelona that no one there had been able to give him a reason for.

Carvajal, the main protagonist of contemporary Spanish architecture, lays in Barcelona the first stone of his personal adventure as an architect who heads important chapters of this contemporary Spanish architecture.

## DITIRAMBO?

Having finished this analysis, someone will be wondering why, after the dissection, the piece has not only remained unscathed, but has even been crowned. Far from any dithyrambs or the skill of the analyst, what is unquestionable is the quality of the work.

I know that it is not usual among architects to see positively without butts the works of the closest architects. Those of us who usually write positively are well aware of that. Carvajal is well aware of that.

I would like to take this opportunity not only to vindicate his figure but also those of that good group of masters of that stupendous Contemporary Spanish Architecture, recognized today by all abroad and, a little less in our country. More than a question of cordiality, it is a question of specific topics: publications, exhibitions, appointments, conferences. Without falling into cloying chauvinisms, it must be noted that the media, including the architecture media, talk more about foreigners than about Spaniards. Or that it is very difficult to find a Spanish author among those cited in any of the articles written by architects, published in recent years.

## THE GOOD CLOTH IN THE ARK IS NOT FOR SALE

Javier Carvajal has never sold his image well. Although one should not seem and not be, in this image society in which we live, one cannot do the opposite: be and not seem, be and not appear. One cannot disappear. To disappear for an architect is to die.

You have to say the things you are convinced of. And write them down. And publish them. And spread them. With resolute determination. For although Carvajal could quote here the beautiful words written by Shakespeare about Fame: "a circle in the water / that never ceases to grow / that dissipates into nothingness", I would reply that the brilliant Englishman wrote them when the words of the Castilian saying "the good cloth in the ark is sold" were still in force, and that today, almost immersed in the new century, the good cloth in the ark is not sold, it is moth-eaten.

## TEACHER

And so, in the ark of Javier Carvajal, in addition to a handful of works of architecture of the first magnitude, there are lots of study plans. Carvajal has made study plans. Look how little attention has been paid to Carvajal's syllabi. Well, it seems that way because I do know that all the authors of the various plans in force today have copied, copied or copied, even partially, these plans. A well-known professor in Madrid confessed to Carvajal how the very new plan already in force in our School was, seasoned, spiced and agitated, one of his study plans.

## KNOW. KNOW HOW TO TEACH. WANT TO TEACH

Of course, as a teacher, there are earlier and more basic things than making curricula. The three conditions that Julián Marías said should be demanded of a good teacher,

knowing, knowing how to teach and wanting to teach, Carvajal has always fulfilled them very well.

He knows a lot. A great deal about architecture, and about everything else as well. His deep knowledge of history is a good match for his knowledge of architecture. Toynbee or Jung, Ortega or Madariaga, are regular guests in his speeches.

She knows how to teach. He has the gift of communication. He knows how to transmit well, and keep the audience in tension with that magic that we teachers know happens very often with good teachers. And always obsessed with terminological precision. "You come in here" began the student fearfully. "That is if I want to" thundered the teacher demanding the correct impersonal "you come in" to properly explain the project. The same thing happens to me now.

He knows how to analyze projects like no one else. Dissect them and look for ways to improve them. He is rigorous and clear in his corrections. I will never forget his brilliant analysis in impeccable French before my students at the ETH Zurich.

He wants to teach. He strives to do so with exemplary dedication. And not to mention in this University. And all this, seasoned with grace and flair, punctually fulfilling the eighteenth-century precept of "instructing by delighting".

And with his vast knowledge, with his brilliant ability to teach and his constant desire to teach, with his delightful instruction, he manages to infect so many with his madness for architecture.

## FINAL

I would like this text of mine analyzing one of his best works, my favorite, to serve as a tribute to Javier Carvajal as an architect. As a great architect. As a master of architecture in the cross of his time and space, in the cross of his teaching and his creative work.

García Lorca, who was such a good craftsman of the word with which he reached sublime heights, summed up his whole life in a very simple "I write so that they will love me". I believe that Javier Carvajal also builds and teaches to be loved. And as God lives, he has succeeded.