

A CLEAN ARCHITECTURE

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The figure of the architect Sánchez Arcas seems, like his work, to grow larger with the passing of the years. His architecture, which was conceived and built with enormous rigor, outside the prevailing fashions, has been able to remain in time. It would seem that the moral cleanliness of the architect, a character of absolute coherence, has been transmitted to his works.

In the study I carried out in the 1980s in my doctoral thesis on Madrid's rationalism, I studied the figure of Sánchez Arcas, who appeared there with his own voice.

The assessment that has been made so far of Sánchez Arcas has been based, mainly, on three points: an unfocused judgment of his work by considering as the only valid orthodoxy that of the rationalist principles practiced to the hilt, a mythification of a small piece of his, the Thermal Power Plant of the University City, read in a supposed and univocal rationalist key, and the forgetting, by contrast, of his most important work, the Hospital Clínico, of which only slight references have been made.

His participation in the controversy of the Modern Movement in Spain, in which he adopted a critical stance against the radical principles of Le Corbusier, did not translate it into verbal attacks, as would Lacasa, with whom he sometimes worked in association, but would show it implicitly in all his interesting works.

His personal way of understanding architecture would have a great influence, never expressed, in all subsequent Spanish architecture. An architect of enormous capacity, recognized by all the professionals of his time, he knew how to solve functional and technological problems with clarity and depth in all his projects. Formally, he did not allow himself to be seduced only by the cubist forms of the rationalists, but sought a way more in keeping with local traditions.

This way of thinking was clearly expressed in the April 15, 1928 survey of the *Gaceta Literaria*:

The works of the architects mentioned (Oud, Poelzig, Le Corbusier, Taut, Dudok, Frank, Hoffman, Mies Van der Rohe) and many others not included, which represent very considerable trends and positions and the Spanish style, provided that the quotation marks do not try to reduce this group to types of architecture, whose purpose is only to imitate the styles and elements of previous eras, without adaptation to the spirit and needs of our own, can not only coexist, but actually exist simultaneously, and not as consecutive orientations, without any of them being able to exclude, much less destroy, the others in a total way.

I do not consider the absence of decoration as an essential characteristic of modern architecture. Nor do I believe that the dividing line between Spanish style and non-Spanish style can be drawn to separate good architecture.

It happens that types of constructive architecture rarely go beyond the simple expression of rationalism. Little progress was made in other aspects since its appearance. Forced was, in its first steps, when detached from all the above, to incur serious defects. It was, however, a great discovery. So frankly oriented, it found followers who, quickly, and with the clarity of expression of a poster, recalled forgotten architectural values.

Its evolution, already slow today, will worsen if it persists in its radicalism. It remains a rural, uncivil architecture, almost always incapable of good urban forms. It does not take into account industrial progress, it does not walk in step with it; on the contrary, it disorients and delays it for lack of discipline and concreteness. For this reason, it is to be hoped that, upon its arrival in Spain, we will not suffer the same experiences.

There are, on the contrary, architectural works that do not try to develop any aesthetic formula conceived a priori. Their purpose seems to be, simply, to give shape to new programs, completely original and very diverse, creating a new aesthetic on more solid foundations than those of the aforementioned group. I am referring mainly, but not exclusively, to buildings in the United States. These works are enhanced by ornamental elements of previous periods, taking advantage of all the teaching of the past, but without making essential concessions, they lack the new ornamentation, the pure detail. It will not be the Baroque, or Renaissance, etc., the worthy successor of our era, nor its derivatives as it seems to be deduced from the various tests carried out a few years ago, but a new style that is a consequence of the new types already created, since not in all cases will be dispensed to enrich the buildings with decoration that, today, in general, is considered superfluous, partly to work with greater freedom in the resolution of architectural problems of difficult solution.

I do not think there is a delay of architecture in Spain, in relation to other activities. Architecture depends, as is natural, of our tastes and needs, is a reflection of them and even more of our moral qualities. Atkinson refers, in his recent publication, that Carlyle, after passing by the Chelsea Hospital hundreds of times, without apparently noticing it, said one day, showing his pleasure, that the architect must have been a good man and a gentleman, a sentence that can be extended beyond the architect¹.

Manuel Sánchez Arcas was born in 1895, and after studying at the Madrid School of Architecture, he graduated in 1920. Miguel de los Santos and Agustín Aguirre belonged to his class.

In 1925, together with J. Arnal Rojas, he entered the competition organized by the Compañía Arrendataria de Tabacos for their building on Sevilla Street, with a turn to Arlabán, in Madrid. The project is won by Gutiérrez Soto and Cánovas, who share the first prize with Blanco Soler and Bergamín.

¹ Sánchez Arcas' answer to La Gaceta Literaria's questionnaire. April 15, 1928

In 1925 he travels to Holland, where he publishes his impressions in the magazine *Arquitectura* in March 1926. There he discovers an architecture that will have a great influence on all his production.

An architecture that we can call traditionalist and that produces some modern examples, with all the distinction of its predecessors, but that does not represent any problem of aesthetics, but that of the simple adaptation of the old types to modern² use.

He adds:

The facades are treated, not as canvases to be decorated, but as surfaces that limit volumes.³

In April 1927, the competition for Preliminary Projects for the Institute of Physics and Chemistry of the Rockefeller Foundation was announced. Martínez Chumillas and the team formed by Miguel de los Santos and Agustín Aguirre, among others, entered the competition.

The first prize was won by Sánchez Arcas, in collaboration with Luis Lacasa, with a project that, with variations, was built between 1929 and 1931. Although the original project was clearer spatially (see, for example, the conference room), the realized project is developed in great detail. For this purpose, they visited similar buildings in Europe before drawing up the final⁴ project.

In 1927, he is called by D. Modesto López Otero, to be part of the team of architects who will draft the projects of the University City. Luis Lacasa, Miguel de los Santos and Agustín Aguirre worked with him.

Sánchez Arcas will be entrusted with the projects of the Hospital Clínico, the Pavilion of the Board and Offices of the University City, and the Thermal Power Plant.

In December 1928, he will make, with Miguel de los Santos, a three-month trip to the United States and Canada to study all the hospital buildings that will help to a more perfect conception of the great Hospital Clínico. From this point on, Sánchez Arcas would become a true specialist in this hospital theme, which he would master and from which he would later develop new projects.

² *Architecture Magazine*. Madrid. March 1926, pp. 108

³ *Architecture Magazine*. Madrid. March 1926, pp. 109

⁴ Construction of the Rockefeller Foundation Institute of Physics and Chemistry began in January 1929 and was completed in August 1931, and it was officially inaugurated in February 1932.

It is published in the *Obras* magazine (year II, number 7), in April 1932, where Sánchez Arcas explains in detail the building and its facilities.

The *Anuario de la Universidad de Madrid*, 1933, gives a detailed account of the building on pages 327 to 331.

In 1929, he won, with J. Arnal (with whom he entered the competition for the Tabacalera in 1925), the competition for the 1,200-bed Hospital Español de la Beneficencia in Mexico. The project, along the same lines as the Hospital Clínico and the other hospital projects of Sánchez Arcas, was built. The perfectly preserved construction is clearly identifiable as the work of Sánchez Arcas⁵.

In 1930, together with Lacasa, he also won first prize in the competition for the Provincial Hospital of Logroño. Many of the solutions that he would develop in the Hospital Clínico and that would appear identical, without any changes, in the Hospital de San Sebastián, already appeared in his plants.

In 1931, he again won another hospital competition, the Provincial Hospital of Toledo. The project, in collaboration with L. Lacasa and F. Solana, was built. On schemes already usual in the work of Sánchez Arcas, he builds an inclusive architecture, where various themes of the repertoire of the architecture of Toledo⁶ are interpreted with a new meaning.

1931 will be the date of the construction of the first building of the University City: The Pavilion of the Board and Offices of the University City, work of Sánchez Arcas. The works, carried out in 90 working days, began on February 14, 1931, and were completed on June 4 of the same year.

The building was finished in exposed brick on the exterior, except for the front, which was clad with limestone. Currently, the entire building is clad with stone. Regarding this situation, with ignorance of the problem, it has been written:

⁵ Although the project for the Hospital de Español de la Beneficencia in Mexico does not appear in the magazines of the time, we have found a graphic reference in the book by B. Giner de los Ríos 50 años de Arquitectura Española (Ed. Pegaso, Mexico). It is attributed there to M. Beltrán de Quintana. The error is similar to that of the attribution made by Giner de los Ríos on page 96, to Sánchez Arcas, as the author of the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, a well-known work by Agustín Aguirre.

The architect's authorship of this building is perfectly clear.

Curiously, in the reedition of the book, very widespread, made by Adir Editores, in its collection Archivos y Documentos, Madrid, 1980, the same errors are reproduced.

It would have been desirable that, since the edition has been changed (the photographs have been replaced by poor line drawings), these glaring errors would have been corrected.

J. Arnal, the architect who collaborated with him in this work, participated that same year of 1929, already from Mexico, in the International Competition for the Columbus Lighthouse.

(See Arquitectura magazine, June 1929. pp. 240).

⁶ An interesting document on the Hospital de Toledo is kept in the Library of the Escuela T.S. de Arquitectura de Madrid. It is a complete album of original photographs, made on the occasion of the construction of the Hospital (builder: Gutiérrez Criado), where, through the abundant graphic material, the building is described in detail.

The works that were completed in the University City were destroyed during the war, given the proximity of the front, and when they were rebuilt according to the primitive traces, the names of the exiled authors were hidden and, in the case of the Pavilion, the brick facades were covered with stone, more in accordance with the representative sense that it was to have.⁷

This is not entirely accurate because the name of Sánchez Arcas, well known, has never been hidden in his authorship of the buildings we are studying. Not even in the case of the Hospital Clínico, which, badly deteriorated during the war, was remodeled, sometimes with substantial changes, by Miguel de los Santos (since this architect had already built the Faculty of Medicine).

As for the total cladding of the Pabellón de la Junta, far from seeking representativeness in the finish, it was done as the most logical solution to cover the deteriorated exposed brick façade, after the damage suffered during the war, given that these were buildings that were on the front line of the front. The system is the same used in the School of Architecture, whose facade, originally of exposed brick, had also been damaged.

In 1931, the plans for this great work, the Hospital Clínico, were drawn up. Just as in Toledo the Hospital was resolved in several low pavilions, here a building conceived as a unit. With nine floors, there are two large parallel bodies dedicated to medicine and surgery. The floors have a great compositional⁸ clarity. The building, whose construction was well advanced at the beginning of the war, was heavily punished and badly damaged. Despite this, its structure, the work of Torroja, like that of the entire University City, continued to serve as the basis for the reconstruction that lasted until 1960.

In 1932, in collaboration with M. Vias, he built schools in the Toledo region of La Sagra, in the village of Recas. As in the Toledo Hospital, he introduces technologically advanced elements (large metal windows), within a building resolved with local⁹ techniques.

That same year, the Rockefeller Institute, whose works had begun in 1929, was inaugurated in February. Also in 1932, Rivas and Zavala participated in the Competition for Military Houses in Madrid (Preliminary project for military buildings on Paseo de Ramón y Cajal).

In 1933, he designed the Thermal Power Plant of the University City: the architect who worked on numerous and important projects, perfectly mastering all the techniques that make possible the reality of Architecture, with a well-known and extensive work done before the civil war, and with another more extensive and anonymous in his later work, outside Spain, is going to be known mainly by the new generations as the author of that great little piece that is the Thermal Power Plant. This, by contrast, did not even appear

⁷ Eduardo Navarro Pallarés. *Arquitectura Magazine*, nº 204-5. Madrid. First Quarter of 1977, pp. 16.

⁸ As for the Hospital Clínico, Oriol Bohigas in his book *Spanish Architecture of the Second Republic* dates it between 1934 and 1936. The original plans show that this work dates from 1931.

⁹ *AC/GATEPAC Magazine* No. 10. Second quarter 1933, pp. 24 and 25.

in the first general plans that were made as a result of the construction of the complex. The position of the critics, who have identified the architect with this work, without analyzing the rest of his work, has perhaps been somewhat unfocused.

Carlos Flores, in his *Arquitectura Española Contemporánea* of 1961, in the same way he did with López Delgado's Figaro, not only does not value it but does not even mention it. Later, in his *Guide to the Architecture of Madrid*, made with Eduardo Amann in 1967, he will say of it that it is the "most authentically avant-garde work of all those built in the University City before 1936."

Oriol Bohigas, in his *Arquitectura Española de la Segunda República* (Spanish Architecture of the Second Republic), presents it "with a polemic character that it had at the time", thus attributing to it a character that it never had.¹⁰

The building is proposed by Sánchez Arcas as the formal resolution of a simple functional problem, with no desire to introduce any conceptual novelty, and with a completely successful result. This architectural piece, with a great capacity for suggestion, has sometimes been taken as a building that summarizes the spirit of the University City, and has been mythologized¹¹.

In 1933, he built, with Eduardo Torroja as engineer, the Algeciras market, where architecture and structure are one and the same thing. The plant, of great simplicity, is covered with a unitary laminar surface in the form of a spherical cap, supported by eight pillars, with 47.60 meters in diameter and 9 centimeters thick. The interior spatial diaphanousness of the market is surprisingly luminous. The atmosphere of great delicacy, in contrast to the normal hustle and bustle of the use to which it is dedicated, makes that in the direct visit to the enclosure, we have confirmed the enormous quality of a space that is constructively supported by elements of such simplicity. It is a very beautiful space.

Also in 1933, José Manuel Aizpurúa invited him to collaborate in the competition for the San Sebastián Hospital. Sánchez Arcas' mastery of the hospital theme is implicitly confirmed by this call from Aizpurúa.

¹⁰ The facade of the Thermal Power Plant was used as the central theme of the poster with which the Official College of Architects of Madrid announced the exhibition dedicated to Luis Lacasa in 1976.

The building belongs, without any doubt, to Sánchez Arcas, without Luis Lacasa having intervened in it at all. The structure was by Eduardo Torroja.

¹¹ In July 1975, a renovation of the heating system of the University City was designed and then carried out, acting on the Thermal Power Plant. The project of the architect Alfonso García Gordillo, still with great respect for the original building (which had already undergone changes after the war), introduces some new formal elements.

On the one hand, it might have been possible to carry out such a renovation, without touching the existing one at all, making a clear distinction with respect to the extension that was introduced.

But, on the other hand, the architecture developed by Sánchez Arcas, without setting rigid conceptual lines, offered the possibility of acting on a work that was presented as formally "open". For those who did not know the original project in detail, it is difficult to know today which parts have been added.

The relationship between the San Sebastián project and the Hospital Clínico is so direct that it is easy to see the identity of many parts of the floors of both projects. This project, conscientiously studied, takes second place to the project of the architect Urcola and his collaborators. The architects published an extensively illustrated booklet with the memory of the Preliminary Project of the Hospital in San Sebastian, where they exhaustively explained the genesis and technical operation of the building. Once the competition was won, they wrote a detailed response to the jury, in which they refuted Bergamín and López Albo, as members of the jury¹².

In addition to these projects, he is also very active in publications and conferences, where he generally develops technical topics.

The 1934-35 course, published by the Instituto Técnico de la Construcción y la Edificación in its course of lectures, will speak on "Practical systems of natural lighting". Organized by the A.P.A.A., in the lecture hall of the Residencia de Estudiantes, he will be the only architect to speak in this series of lectures on sanitary buildings (in it, Dr. Cardenal and Dr. Jiménez Díaz will take part).

In 1933 he was appointed architect-director of the National Museums of Natural History, the Archaeological Museum and the Botanical Garden of Madrid.¹³

In 1935, together with Calzada, Ruiz Olmos and Díaz Sarasola, he entered the IV National Architecture Competition, with a Preliminary Project for a Museum of the Car and Popular Art.

After the civil war, Sánchez Arcas moved to the USSR, where his work as an architect would be complex.¹⁴

He is a collaborator of the Academy of Architecture of the USSR. In his desire to do something useful he has written "History of Spanish Architecture". At the Academy, it made a great impression. They praised it highly and promised to publish it. Later, he was told that the war did not allow the publication of expensive books. And, soon after, his ideas and the materials that appeared in his history, began to appear in the magazine "Arquitectura Soviética", in long works with a character more of thesis than of history. And Sánchez Arcas did not sign them; the signatures were those of his Soviet colleagues at the Academy of Architecture. He also designed an air-raid

¹² A copy of the interesting brochure is kept in the Library of the ETSAM, in a box of the so-called "rare books". Edited with simplicity, but with great care, it explains in detail the theme of the competition. It was published in 1933 in Artes Gráficas Faure. C/ Abascal 35. Madrid. Signed by S. Arcas, Lagarde, Labayen and Aizpurúa. It includes 21 photographs of a model with the study of the sunlight. Plans, elevations and axonometrics on front and back covers.

¹³ It is reported in the magazine La Construcción Moderna. Madrid. December 1, 1953, p.p.29.

¹⁴ The biographical information about Sánchez Arcas, after his departure from Spain, was provided to us by his daughter, María Sánchez Arcas. Among the documentation that she provided on that occasion, there were interesting testimonies of the architect's relationship with leading figures in the world of culture: Pablo Picasso, Eluard, Neruda, etc.

shelter, which earned him many congratulations from the Chief of the corresponding Section, a civil servant under the orders of the Chief of Defense in Moscow. Sanchez Arcas was very happy, he believed he had done something useful and felt the joy and legitimate pride of having contributed to the defense of the first socialist country".

A few weeks later, the construction of the shelter began, but signed as the author of the project, not our good Sánchez Arcas, but the head of that section, who depended on the commander-in-chief of the Moscow defense.

Sánchez Arcas did not comment. And he goes to the Academy¹⁵ every day.

At this time Sánchez Arcas wrote a book on Spanish architecture, which was published and edited by the Moscow Academy of Architecture.

In Moscow, along with his work at the Academy of Architecture, he designed air-raid shelters, fortifications and defense works.

In 1941, with the German troops 20 km from Moscow, he was evacuated to the Urals, to the city of UFA, where, until 1943, he belonged to the State Projects Office, where he carried out "type" projects for hospitals for war wounded, adaptable to different geographical situations.

In '43 and until '46, he returned to Moscow to his Academy of Architecture.

In the competition for the reconstruction of Stalingrad, he wins second prize.

The projects he carried out at that time were predominantly those of standard agricultural housing for devastated areas.

In 1946, he moved to Warsaw as ambassador until he resigned in 1949. He then moved to the Projects Office attached to the Ministry of Health in Warsaw.

For this office, among others, a project for the Institute of Hematology and a 200-bed children's hospital in Warsaw was built.

It builds numerous health centers, small clinics and hospitals for the villages, according to a General Plan of the Ministry of Health.

In 1968, he moved to Berlin to work at the Institute of History and Art of Construction. He publishes several articles in German magazines and some books, such as *The City and Traffic* and *Form und bauweise der schalen*.

In the last months of his life, he obtained a passport to come to Spain, a wish he was unable to fulfill, as he died in Berlin on February 5, 1970.

¹⁵ Enrique Castro Delgado, *Mi fe se perdió en Moscú*. Luis de Caralt Ed. Barcelona. 1964

In these years after the Spanish Civil War, his architectural activity, extensive and submerged in voluntary anonymity, was specifically dedicated to hospital architecture, which he always dominated.

He did not act directly, as some critics have indicated, in the well-known reconstruction of the city of Warsaw.

He was an architect of great quality, with an enormous professional sense and an exceptional capacity for work. The coherence of his thinking led him to the constant pilgrimage that was his life. His way of understanding architecture, so far little analyzed and valued, has influenced more than it may seem at first glance, in all the Spanish architecture of the postwar period.

Of him, it could be said, in addition to being a good architect, what he put in Atkinson's mouth in his reply to the Literary Gazette, "He was a good man and a gentleman."

I would like to thank María Sánchez Arcas, the architect's daughter, for her kind welcome on Friday, June 12, 1981, at her home on Velázquez Street in Madrid, and for her interesting conversation, with innumerable facts about her father and the valuable documents I was able to consult.