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VOID AS UNITY OF CONTRASTS

ALEJANDRO DE LA SOTA,
CIVIL GOVERNMENT OF TARRAGONA

Simona Pierini



Alejandro de la Sota at the Civil Government of Tarragona, 1964

Introduction

Moisés Puente

“The eloquent silences of Alejandro de la Sota”

Despite the evident over-simplification of the endeavour, if it were possible to classify in broad lines the design processes of architects (the same exercise could be applied to artists), we could identify two fundamental, almost diametrically opposed project methodologies, one “additive”, the other “subtractive”. On this basis, the independent genealogies of these methodologies in the history of the discipline could then be charted.

For additive architects (or artists), the materials that can feasibly form part of a project are always on stand-by, ready to be used at the slightest opportunity. All material – visual, programmatic, spatial, constructive, etc.– that could feasibly be used jostles in the mind of the creator, and no occasion is lost to ensure that it finally appears, albeit sometimes partially, in the realisation of the project. The materials used by the additive architect are gathered, amassed and collected from all of the possible options, to then be combined in the project. Nothing must be wasted, nothing can be rejected in giving a project its form. If we look closely at the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier or Rem Koolhaas –or, in other disciplines, of Pablo Picasso, Federico Fellini or Georges Perec– we will see the vast torrent of information that is poured into every individual project. The different themes to be addressed are grouped, ordered and stratified to open new paths at each stage in the project; one design does not necessarily lead straight to the next, but it may well be the precursor for a subsequent project many years later. The work of an additive creator is so rich and complex in its themes that attempting to chart its development is a constant untying of knots, an untangling of mental webs of extreme complexity.

By contrast, the subtractive approach runs along opposing lines, creating a complex system of filters. The materials of the visible world are carefully classified, and only those that pass through the mental filter of the creator will stand a chance of being used in the project. Of course, this particular approach also entails a gathering of resources, but the subtractive creator establishes clear laws of differentiation, gradually discarding elements in a process that funnels the many inputs, patiently reducing the themes to be addressed; the choices that will ultimately form the nucleus of the project are the result of a lengthy process of depletion and elimination, of an obsessive refinement of items. Architects such as Adolf Loos and Mies van der Rohe would fit perfectly

in this matrix, as would figures such as Jorge Oteiza, Ad Reinhardt, Juan Rulfo or Thomas Bernhard in other disciplines, periods and cultural settings. Their careers clearly exhibit a careful process of searching for the ideal within a small number of deliberately selected themes.

If we take the example of architecture, Mies van der Rohe is the very model of this subtractive approach. We can see, for example, the narrow choice of forms that he addressed in his American stage: the tower, the sports pavilion and the large, bright hall, each of them represented by a near-perfect example. The Seagram Building (New York, 1958-1960), the Farnsworth House (Plano, Illinois, 1945-1951) and the Neue Nationalgalerie (Berlin, 1962-1968) mark the culmination of processes of refinement (following several previous attempts, completed to greater or lesser success) and the achievement of ideal prototypes at the end of a continual process of reduction to the essential. Rather than opening new paths, new spatial themes and programmes, the only apparent concern of van der Rohe was to reach a degree of refinement and level of perfection that one would more readily associate with classicism, a fairly unusual trait in modern architecture. Each project belongs to a single, unbroken chain in pursuit of an ideal.

There is no doubt that Alejandro de la Sota, like Mies van der Rohe, belongs to the group of subtractive architects, though while van der Rohe was intransigent and inflexible in his linguistic systems and in the refining of a small number of typologies, we could say that De la Sota was subtractive in a more retroactive sense. It was through the evolution of his own career, with his head half-turned towards completed projects, that De la Sota became aware of the path he must take. The gradual refinement, which became more radical in his later work, served as a means of exploring and explaining what he had achieved up to that point.

More than two decades after the completion of his other defining work, the Maravillas College gymnasium, De la Sota wrote of the project: “I believe that not doing architecture is a path towards doing it, and all those who do not do architecture will have done more for it than those who, having learned the discipline, continue to pursue it”.¹

¹ ALEJANDRO DE LA SOTA, “Carta Maravillas” [1985], in MOISÉS PUENTE (ed.), *Alejandro de la Sota. Escritos, conversaciones, conferencias*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 2002, p. 73.

Despite the doubts, hiatuses and twists in his career, De la Sota remains consistent in the approach to each of his projects. His life's endeavour, then, was to strip away work, to work seriously with only a small, ever-decreasing volume of data, to effortlessly construct a new architecture.

Three periods, two silences

Period 1: plastic architecture

Alejandro de la Sota was born in 1913 in Pontevedra and began his studies in architecture at the School of Architecture of Madrid, although they were interrupted by the outbreak of the Civil War. After completing his studies and accepting his first commissions in Galicia, De la Sota was contracted by the National Institute of Rural Development and Colonization (Instituto Nacional de Colonización y Desarrollo Rural, INC), for whom he designed several towns. His first projects essentially conformed to the existing style in Spain, where the halting influence of the international modern movement merged with the values –so in vogue in the popular architecture of the time– that Fernando Chueca Goitia referred to in his discussion of the “invariants” of Spanish architecture. Notable from this period are the town of Esquivel (Sevilla, 1952-1963) –an INC commission carried out after a series of educational journeys around Spain to compile information on popular architecture– and the Arvesú house (Madrid, 1953-1955, no longer standing), where he experimented with a discourse similar to that of German Expressionism. In his experiments with the different currents of modern architecture, we also find exercises in Italian style, such as the Zamora houses (1956-1957) –very much along the same lines as the work being carried out in that period by architects such as Ignazio Gardella, for example– or attempts at neoplastic style, such as the Pontevedra municipal sports hall for the Feria del Campo (Madrid, 1956). In reference to this period, De la Sota said: “I believed in colour, in form [...], I believed strongly in aesthetics”.²

Silence 1

Towards the mid-1950s, at the height of his career and with a great many official commissions, De la Sota comes into possession of a collection of books

on the American work of Richard Neutra, Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer, and decides: “to opt for physical rather than chemical architecture, where no element is mixed with another to produce a third, and where a simple tool can be used to discover the personality of each element”.³ References are no longer local, no longer the examples learned at the School of Architecture or taken from popular architecture; the craftsman's work with lime and mortar, the skill of chemical architecture (or plastic, as it has been described above), must be abandoned and the drab architecture of the Franco regime abandoned. It is at this stage in his career that De la Sota enters the classical period of his production. Returning to the forefront of the discipline is no longer a question of subscribing to the models of the international modern movement, which had struggled to make an impact on Spanish architecture in the post-war period, but rather a question of adopting a new attitude with regard to the project itself. In a number of stylistic exercises he experiments with different modern strategies, whether Italian rationalism, certain schools of Scandinavian architecture or the work of Mies van der Rohe himself.

Period 2: physical architecture

Although it could almost be claimed that one of the defining projects of Alejandro de la Sota, the Maravillas College gymnasium (Madrid, 1960-1962), resembles the work of a Mies van der Rohe transplanted into post-war Spain, there are certain differences in the approaches of the two architects. While Mies van der Rohe spent his whole life striving to refine and perfect models of only a few types (the tower, the sports pavilion and the large, bright hall, as we saw earlier), for the Maravillas gymnasium De la Sota aimed to offer the best solution to a particular problem, rather than dealing with general typological abstractions. The solution to combining the multiple elements of the project – gymnasium, swimming pool and classrooms – in such a small space took as its starting point the logical consideration of each point. “The procedure for logical architecture is a good one: you set out the full extension of a problem, compile and order an exhaustive amount of data, taking into account all of the possible perspectives. You examine all of the material possibilities for constructing the solution for which these possibilities have been considered. A result is obtained: if the path is a serious one, if it is true, the result is architecture”.⁴ In this quote from his

² ALEJANDRO DE LA SOTA, “Conferencia” [Barcelona, 1980], *Ibid.*, pp. 181-182.

³ ALEJANDRO DE LA SOTA, “Recuerdos y experiencias”, in *Alejandro de la Sota. Arquitecto*, Ediciones Pronaos, Madrid, 1989, pp.16, y 171.

⁴ ALEJANDRO DE LA SOTA, “Por una arquitectura lógica” [1982], in PUENTE, MOISÉS (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 71.

famous text *Por una arquitectura lógica*, De la Sota expands on the words of his maestro Mies van der Rohe: “I collect the facts –all the facts, as much as I can get. I study these facts and then I act accordingly”.⁵

Although in the text that follows, Simona Orsini explains certain key points to understanding another of the main projects of Alejandro de la Sota, the Civil Government building in Tarragona (1957-1964), it is useful to note some general ideas here. Whereas the inspiration for the Maravillas gymnasium was taken from the American work of Mies van der Rohe, the roots of the Civil Government building can be found in modern European principles, particularly the Italian rationalism of Giuseppe Terragni, in a language consistent with the representative function of the building within the structures of the fascist dictatorship. However, his eagerness to form part of the world of American production (see, for example, the work of the Breuer and van der Rohe outside their native countries) merged with an (apparent) industrialisation: slabs of stone are relieved of their bulk and instead used to form a fine, smooth skin, a surface that barely hints at the potential representative value of the original material. The copper handrails of the main staircase, painstakingly crafted by skilled metalworkers, emulate the lines of a construction industry that did not exist in Spain at that time. Similarly, the furniture in the style of van de Rohe, the fittings, the benches at the entrance: everything appears to issue from an industrial production that is mere illusion; in fact, only the Arne Jacobsen chairs purchased for the auditorium were industrially manufactured; everything else was pure craftsmanship, with a certain degree of industrial disguise.

In the block of houses on Calle Prior (Salamanca, 1963-1965), modern logic is combined with that of the locality, paradoxically leading to the construction of a smooth façade in rough stone (the local sandstone, which architects were obliged to use in the historical quarter of the city). The narrow street in which the building is located requires the windows to jut out from the façade in order for residents to see what is happening outside. The bays recall both the classical Galician bays and galleries and the garret windows of Arne Jacobsen, which, in turn, originate from the bow windows of England.

⁵ MIES VAN DER ROHE, LUDWIG, “Conversations with Mies” [1955], in JOHN PETER, *The Oral History of Modern Architecture: Interviews with the Greatest Architects of the Twentieth Century*, Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1994, p. 162. Also in: MOISÉS PUENTE, (ed.), *Conversations with Mies van der Rohe*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 2008, p. 59.

Silence 2

In around 1970, nearing the age of 60 and having lost out on the professorship in Elements of Composition at the School of Architecture of Madrid⁶ and an important commission (the head office of Bankuni6n in Madrid, 1970), a failure that would be echoed five years later with the unconstructed Aviaco headquarters project (Madrid, 1975), De la Sota shut himself away in his study (in what Mariano Bay6n would term “house arrest”)⁷, having no more to do with architectural publications, giving very few talks, and holing up in the office of his government position with the Postal Service: “One day I decided to stop working and tried to think freely about what I was doing and what others were doing. That same day, so many lateral concepts stuck to serious architectural thinking, started to fall apart”.⁸ De la Sota seems, then, to have turned his gaze to the positivism of North-American culture, placing almost blind faith in new techniques.

He adopted a more radical modern posture and cloistered himself in an obsessive search for refinement, distancing himself from Spanish architectural culture and setting against the lessons of the modern masters a criticism of the stance that sees a crisis of ideology in modernity. Under his self-imposed house arrest, De la Sota espoused a “non-architectural” architecture, an architecture totally removed from any form of disciplinary culture. His work recovered the common sense with which he had experimented in the popular architecture of his early work.

In the international architectural scene of the era, the legacy of the modern movement was widely held to be a spent force, and diverse cultural roots were instead being sought in the past, from the efforts of Louis I. Kahn to recover the Beaux Arts tradition, to the calls of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown to revive vernacular and popular culture, and the forays of Aldo Rossi and Giorgio Grassi into the value of collective memory and the tradition of typology. Alejandro de la Sota distanced himself radically from the Spanish architects of his generation and their fascination with these new changes, making a stiff, modern resistance the crux of his work: “We run recklessly towards that which

⁶ See: ALEJANDRO DE LA SOTA, “Memoria a la c6tedra de Elementos de Composici6n” [1970], in PUENTE, MOISÉS (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 55-62.

⁷ MARIANO BAY6N, “Conversaci6n con Alejandro de la Sota desde su arresto domiciliario”, *Arquitecturas Bis*, no. 1, Barcelona, May 1974, pp. 25-27.

⁸ ALEJANDRO DE LA SOTA, “Arquitectura y arquitecturas” [sf], in MOISÉS PUENTE, (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 74.

may represent a real solution, we pursue and pamper the prophet to make him a reality, maintain the image to get everything possible out of it".⁹

Period 3: a simple architecture

The next period was one of little production and numerous tributes to a maestro widely thought to be tired and finished. De la Sota no longer read the specialist journals, looking instead at leaflets and samples of new construction materials. Alien to the modern faith in technical and social progress, for De la Sota nothing is left of modern determinism, of form defining function... In his work there is no room for the utopian project.

De la Sota first used sheet metal for the Caja Postal building (Madrid, 1972-1977) and later returned to Robertson sheet metal for the Post Office building in León (1981-1984), but always had a longing eye on the United States – the setting for van der Rohe's late works and home to an impressive construction industry. Fast and straightforward construction techniques, with the lightest and most precise materials that could be found in Spain at the time, became common in his designs for buildings of all types, whether a shell to house large computers (Caja Postal, Madrid), an institutional building (Post Office building, León), family homes, such as the Domínguez house (A Caeira, Pontevedra, 1973-1978), or a group of houses in a coastal town (Alcudia, Mallorca, 1983-1984). The need for new techniques gave rise to new architectures.

The technical enthusiasm for construction with light, industrially produced materials is joined by the concept of "simplicity". Just as De la Sota does not reveal the instruments used in conceiving a project, claiming adherence simply to logic, neither should the efforts of the architect or the construction teams be revealed. De la Sota even boasted that in the construction of his buildings, "the workmen didn't sweat", and that the constructions could be completely and effortlessly disassembled with nothing more than a screwdriver. The liberation from the effort of manual work, of craftsmanship which he had experimented with and subsequently rejected in the 1950s –does not merely reach its peak at this point in his career, it becomes a source of pride: "All elements of the construction are pre-manufactured and taken from the factory or wherever else,

in this case to Mallorca. Metal panels, metal framework, metal partitions, fittings produced in workshops, large modules of pre-fabricated paving, all of it easy to assemble. It saves times, guarantees quality and imposes forms that are perhaps far removed from what we would consider Architecture".¹⁰ And it is through this concern for simplicity, for making architecture simple, that his thinking comes into direct contact with the positivism of post-war America, with figures such as Charles and Ray Eames. Similarly to the Eames' views on design, for De la Sota the existence of architecture necessarily hinges on recognition of the problem, what Charles Eames would refer to as "constraint": "The sum of all constraints. Here is one of the few effective keys to the design problem – the ability of the designer to recognize as many of the constraints as possible – his willingness and enthusiasm for working within these constraints".¹¹ De la Sota has in common with Eames this joy of work, the enjoyment of an activity that diverts, an activity far removed from the self-imposed suffering of modern architecture and its canons, so distanced from real life: "The emotion of architecture puts a smile on your face, it makes you laugh. Life does not".¹²

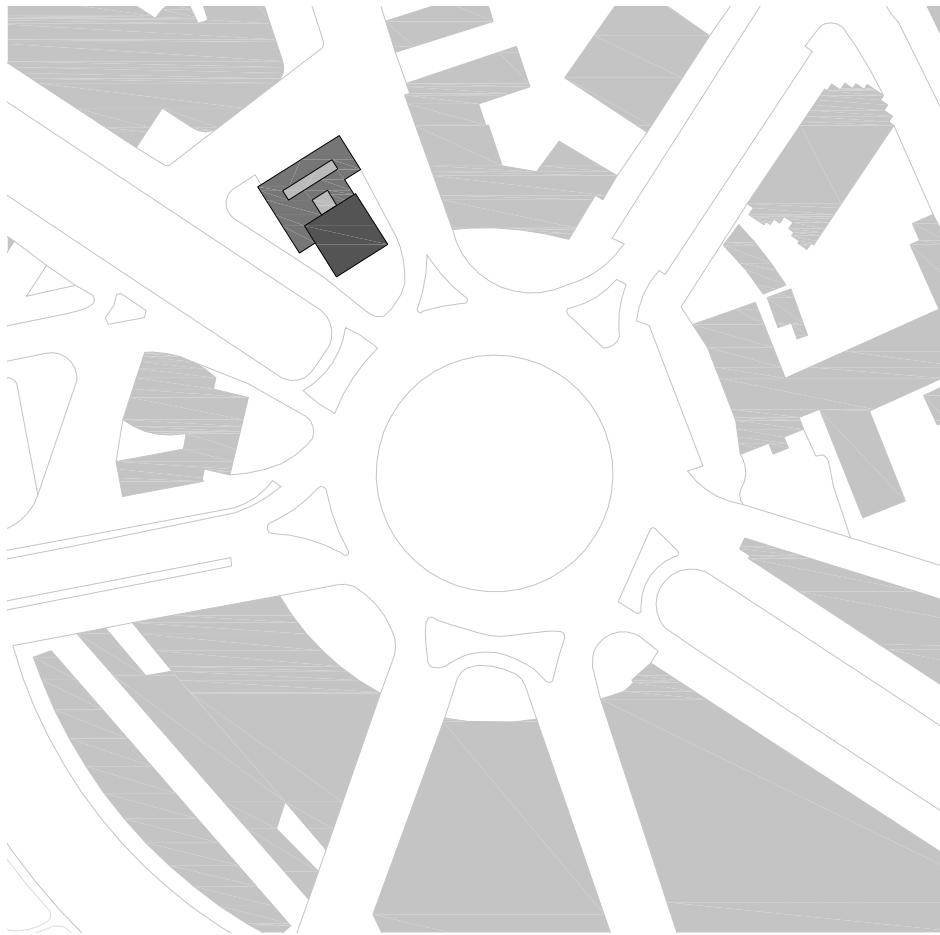
Moisés Puente

⁹ ALEJANDRO DE LA SOTA, "Arquitectura posmoderna" [sf], *Ibid.*, p. 67.

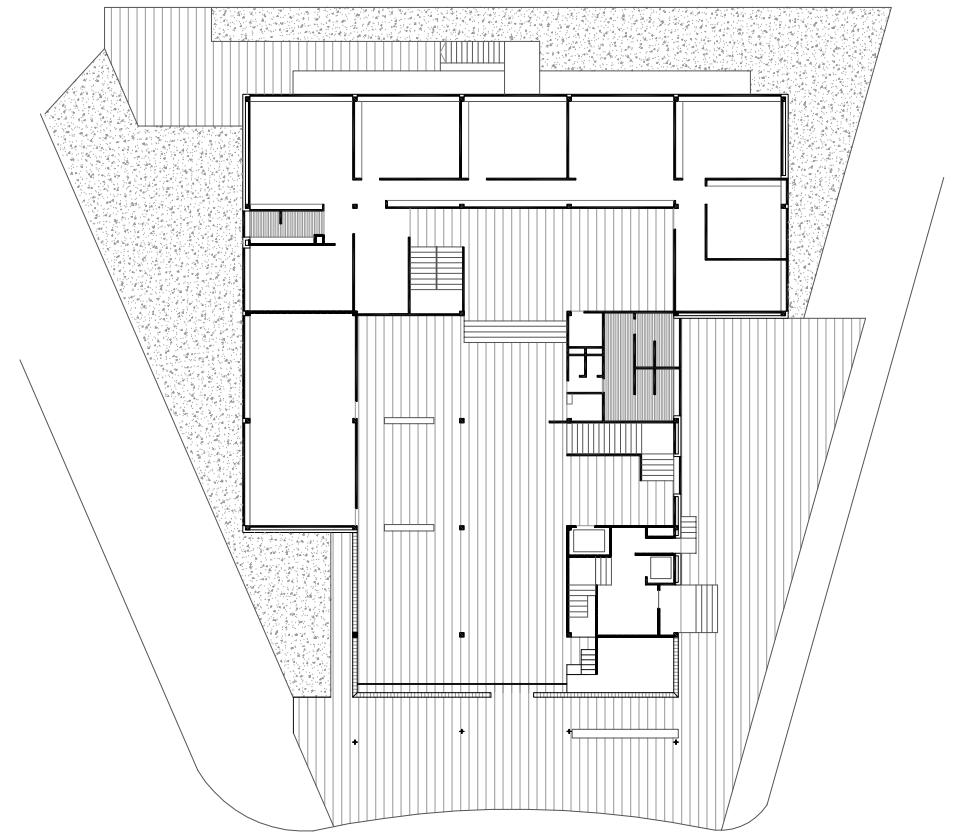
¹⁰ ALEJANDRO DE LA SOTA, "memoria de las casas de Alcudia", in IÑAKI ÁBALOS, JOSEP LLINÀS, Y MOISÉS PUENTE, *Alejandro de la Sota*, Fundación Caja de Arquitectos, Barcelona, 2009, p. 480.

¹¹ CHARLES EAMES, "What Is Design?", in JOHN & MARILYN NEUHART, and RAY EAMES, *Eames Design. The Work of the Office of Charles and Ray Eames*, Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1989, p. 15

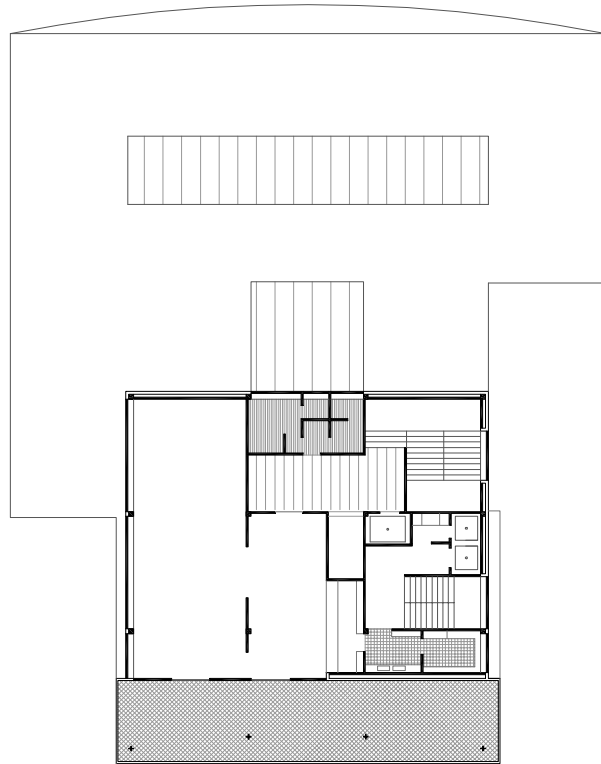
¹² ALEJANDRO DE LA SOTA, "Recuerdos y experiencias", *op. cit.*, p. 19.



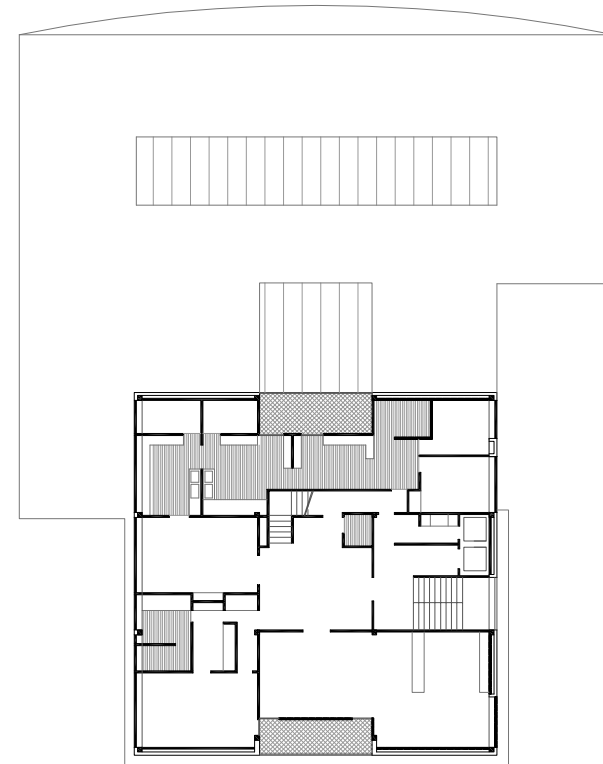
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Alejandro de la Sota



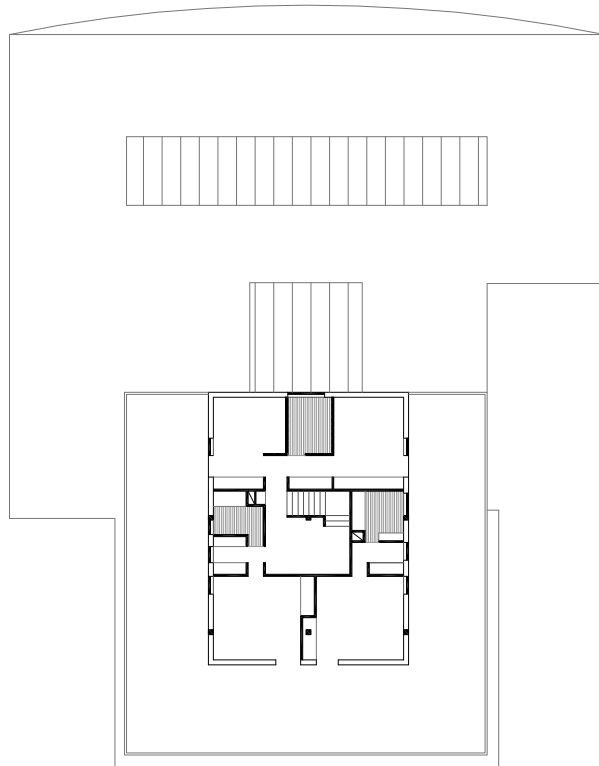
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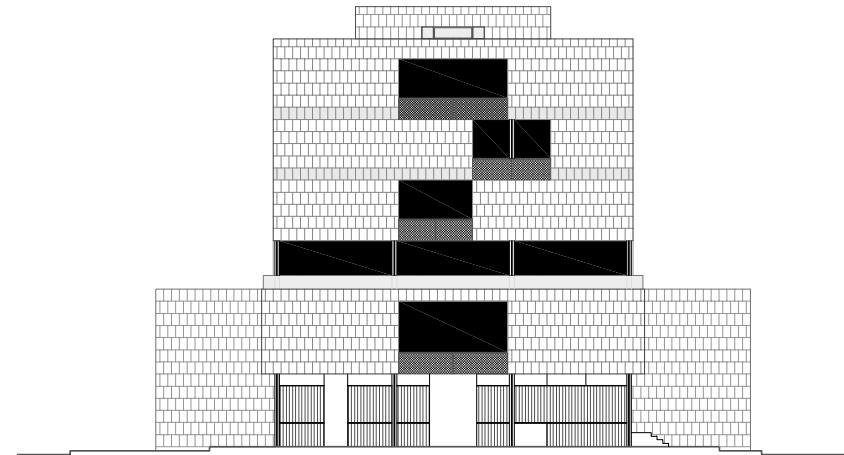
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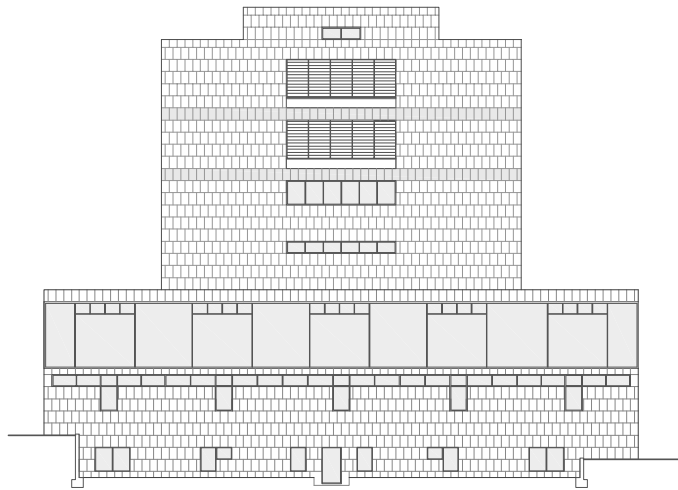
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Alejandro de la Sota



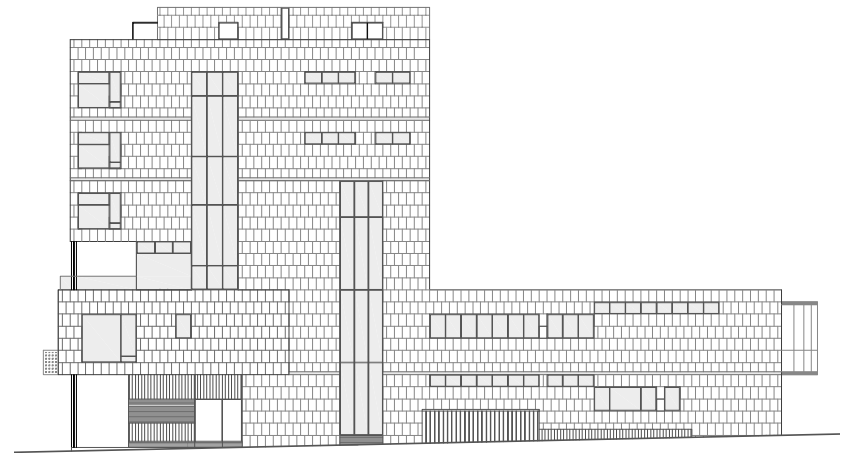
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Alejandro de la Sota



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Civil Government of Tarragona, 1957,
Alejandro de la Sota



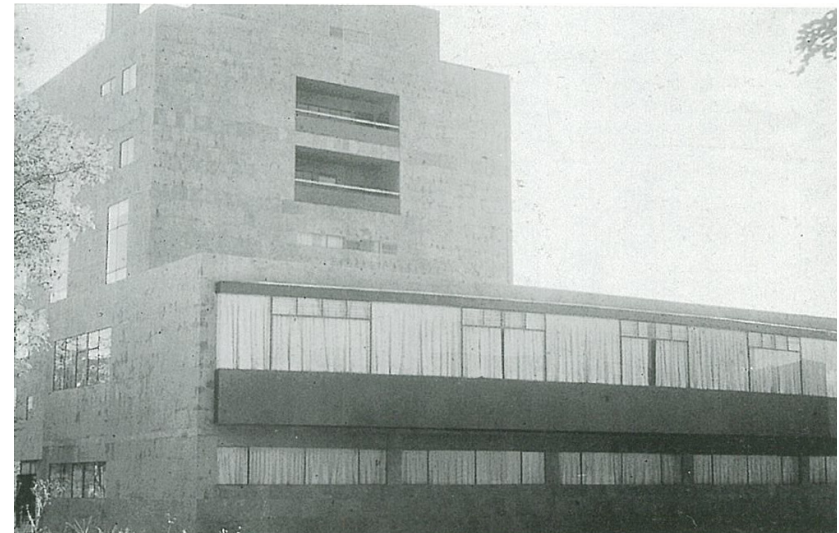
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Alejandro de la Sota



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VOID AS UNITY OF CONTRASTS

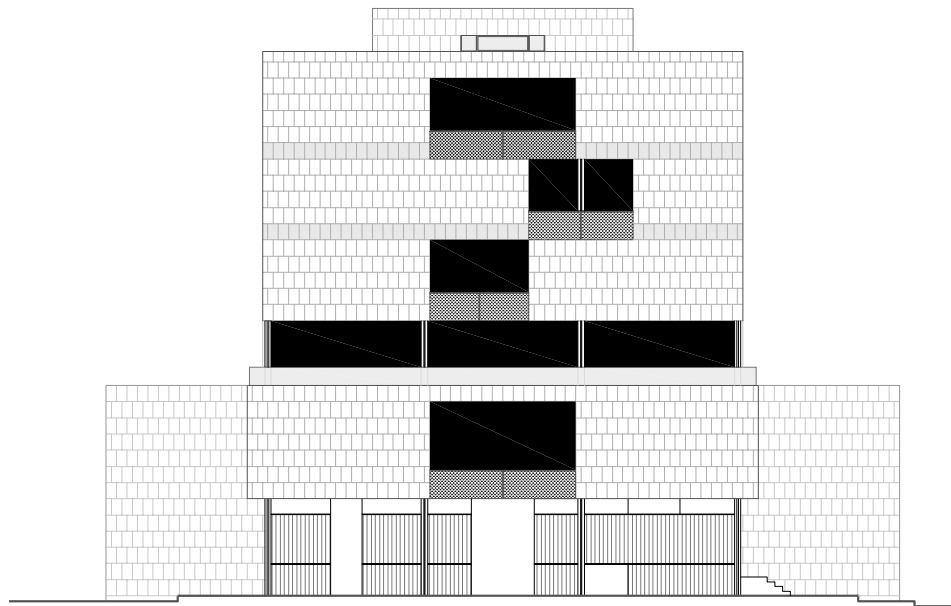
ALEJANDRO DE LA SOTA, CIVIL GOVERNMENT OF TARRAGONA

KEYWORDS

Art, Architecture, Spain, Abstraction, Design

ABSTRACT

This article presents one of the most outstanding works of the second half of the 20th century European architecture. Simona Pierini develops a critical study of the Civil Government building in Tarragona in order to appoint the esthetical background of the Spanish architecture during the 50's. The analysis is focused in the problems common to the architecture practice, such as the building function and the urbanism, but establishes as well the formal and conceptual relations among De la Sota's work, and the work of contemporary artists, such as Paul Klee, Josef Albers and Jorge Oteiza.



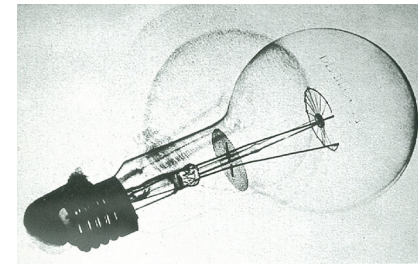
The problem of architecture is a mental process, finding an authentic way of resolving that very problem. I have on occasion compared the design process to a game of blindfold chess; there is no possibility of a "threatened piece" or a "moved piece". It is our mind, also blindfolded, which must consider all of the details received and, as I have said, those details that we add ourselves; it is our mind that must seek out all of the possible combinations that can provide a solution to so many possibilities.¹

There is a considerable amount of evidence available on Alejandro de la Sota's understanding of the architectural project. Not only do we have his writings and his lectures, we can also turn to the articles of those who worked with him, such as Juan Navarro Baldeweg, José Manuel López-Peláez or Josep Llinàs. Often, when De la Sota discusses important issues related to his understanding of architecture, he does so indirectly, by speaking about other things. Indeed, De la Sota, a modern master trained in post-war Madrid, would often accompany his talks with slides showing diverse objects that he associated with concepts applicable to architecture.²

With this analysis of the Civil Government building in Tarragona, which I present as a critical reading of a constructed project, I would like to take a closer look at one particular question: the relationship that can be established between architecture and art. I have endeavoured to produce an analysis that offers both a structure that is useful to the reader and a concrete understanding of the means by which an artistic concept is transferred into an architectural project. My analysis starts from the theory that the design process of the Civil Government building can be interpreted as one in which the architect identifies problems common to any architectural project (for example, the relationship with the city or the intended function of the building) and opens them to operations more commonly associated with figurative arts (such as abstraction, or the notion of material itself) to establish new architectural solutions.

¹ ALEJANDRO DE LA SOTA, "Recuerdos y experiencias", in *Alejandro de la Sota. Arquitecto*, Ediciones Pronaos, Madrid, 1989, pp. 16-17.

² "1. The bulb. The best performance with the minimum material. 2. Paul Klee. Transparencies. Suggesting the immaterial, putting stakes in a field, pointing. 3. Balenciaga. 4. Miró: colour, vacuum. 5. Planes. The most perfect technology. 6. Sidings. Confused and with their own laws 7. The channel. 8. Cooperative. Also the light in the Haag, Buijs and Lürsen cooperative. 9. Albers. The figurative order, the essence of the plan". ISMAEL GUARNER, "Sobre unas diapositivas de las conferencias de la Sota", *Bau*, no. 13, Santander, 1995, pp. 84-87.



1. The bulb



2. Paul Klee

De la Sota, in the text quoted at the beginning of the paper, refers to the design process as the selection of those elements that the architect may have in mind; the materials of the project and their unity, “all the received data [...] should respond with an unavoidable solution”³. That said, he also explains –using the metaphor of the blindfold– that the course of the project may not be rational, logical and fully describable, as José Manuel López-Peláez reminds us in his article on De la Sota’s caricatures.⁴

Josep Llinàs, who worked with Alejandro de la Sota on the renovation of the Civil Government building in the 1980s, expressed the following view in his introduction to a collection of De la Sota’s texts: “I believe that what [the texts] put forward could indeed have been at the origins of the work and, conversely, that the thought process that accompanies the project and the finished work could itself have originated the texts”.⁵ This has allowed the specific problems of the project to be addressed in the light of the artistic reflections contained in the texts.

If we consider the conceptual nature of modern art, the fact that each piece requires its audience to contemplate it not passively but with an active effort to interpret the process of its creation and the meaning of the finished work, we can understand the research that this analysis suggests on the basis of a series of key concepts, such as abstraction and material.

Problems affecting the project

The design won a contest opened in 1957 for the construction of a public building in an area of urban expansion in the city of Tarragona, whose roots stretch back to Roman times. The building was to be situated next to a recently

³ ALEJANDRO DE LA SOTA, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

⁴ “Don Alejandro’s archive contains hundreds of these drawings, some of which are published and have gained a certain popularity. They certainly demonstrate the ease with which graphical elements can be used not only to illustrate ideas but also as a genuine instrument for dialogue between mental activity and its physical manifestation. (...) It is less a question of distorting reality than questioning it intelligently and looking at it from a different perspective that could prove to be surprising, and of the artist seeking out and playing with this surprise”, JOSÉ MANUEL LÓPEZ-PELÁEZ, “Caricaturas”, *Circo*, no. 26, Madrid, 1995, pp. 4 & 9.

⁵ JOSEP LLINÀS, “Introducción”, in MOISÉS PUENTE, (ed.), *Alejandro de la Sota. Escritos, conversaciones, conferencias*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 2002, p. 11.

modernised circular plaza, whose design was immediately criticised by the architect. This explains why De la Sota chose to clad the building in stone, a clear sign of his rejection of its real physical context and a move to identify instead with the ancient city.

The building was to house the headquarters of the Civil Government, and would therefore serve as the residence of the governor, an institution of the highest authority over the city and one that wielded considerable power in Spain under Franco. This dual function –of housing both the offices of the Civil Government and the official residence of the governor, secretarial staff and guest quarters– was another of the problems posed by the project, as the architect himself acknowledged. This accounts for the fact that, from the first preliminary studies, the total volume was broken into two parts, vertically in the initial sketches, and horizontally in the final design. In his preliminary report De la Sota had already made reference to the efforts to combat this ambiguity in the intended use of the construction.

Among the design notes on the volumetrics of the building it is interesting to consider the reference to the redesigned office tower of the Johnson Wax Buildings, by Frank Lloyd Wright, where the section is constructed around the empty space created by cutting back the concrete slabs.⁶

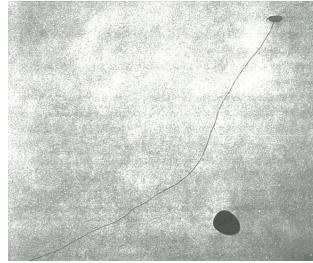
The facade at once illustrates the problems that the city and the intended function posed to the project and the solutions that were found to these problems. The frontal view is often presented in black and white photographs, almost as an abstraction of its solid and hollow spaces, of its simplification into black squares and their composition on a white plane.

It is a facade in which the cubic volume of stone sits above the open space of the ground floor, where the only discernible elements are the four iron pillars distributed along the imperceptible arc drawn by the circular plaza; the balconies and gallery are simply cuts and recesses in the stone. The horizontal black line, drawn by the gallery on the second floor, appears to rest only on

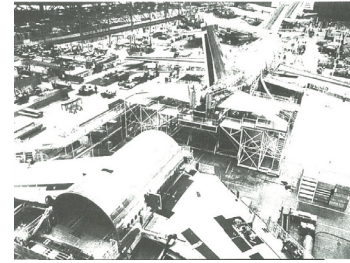
⁶ Among the writings and notes of the volumetric study of the building, there is one about the Johnson Wax office block (Racine, 1944) by Frank Lloyd Wright. In the section, the block is constructed around the space created by cutting back the concrete slabs.



3. Balenciaga



4. Miró



5. Planes



6. Sidings

the empty space of the central gallery. Above this, the square, offset balconies establish an equilibrium in the design of the facade, without revealing anything about what is housed within. On the top level there is a small residential space with a central patio, built on the roof of the structure and barely visible; a small villa set back from the face of the cubic volume that the building presents.

Abstraction and material in architecture

Is it feasible to consider the hypothesis that Alejandro de la Sota found in some of the concepts of modern art a means of solving the problems with which his architectural project was faced?

Through the writings and talks of De la Sota we can easily draw a line that runs through abstract art from Paul Klee to Josef Albers, taking in the work of the Bauhaus school.

Inspirations. I say this with the utmost humility: I always seek architectural inspirations that are far removed from me, far removed from the architect. I do not like books on architecture. I would never like to think that something which is important to me in architecture has not found its motivation in something very far removed from the discipline [...] Things that have given me an understanding, a vibration that I have been able to use.⁷

At this point it is poignant to recall one of a De la Sota's more common anecdotes:

I was lucky enough to have sufficient resolve not to work [...] The good news came in the most absurd way. I remember that it was a book by Marcel Breuer that was called simply *Sun & Shadow*. The

⁷ ALEJANDRO DE LA SOTA, "Conferencia en Barcelona" [1980], in Moisés Puente, (ed.), *op. cit.*, págs. 177-178.

book discussed how Breuer protected the windows (...) He produced sculptures without being a sculptor.⁸

De la Sota credits Breuer with giving a clear explanation in this book (a good complement to the rest of his works) of precisely this movement, this idea of the unity of contrasts that is alluded to in the title. But there is also a direct thread that links Breuer and his book *Sun & Shade* to the facade of the building in Tarragona, and this thread passes through the work of Semper and his notion of the facade as a "dressing", as a work of textile art.⁹

De la Sota also made frequent reference to Josef Albers. There are many aspects of Albers' work that we can again identify in the experimentation of De la Sota: textile art, for one, but also the work on materials and the theme of the square, superimposed on the concepts of positive and negative form. Indeed, one of the main ideas espoused by Albers concerned the identification and correct use of materials: "The form depends on the materials with which one is working".¹⁰

The handrail of the principal staircase in the Civil Government building, folded to ensure the greatest possible resistance, appears to come straight from the laboratories of the Bauhaus, where Albers taught the preliminary course.

"It seems to me that in architecture there are two ways of going about things: physical and chemical. I chose the physical way, where no element is mixed with another to produce a third, and where a simple pincer can be used to discover the personality of each element".¹¹

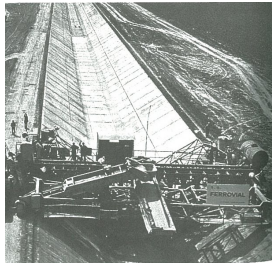
Many critics have stressed the importance of materials in the architecture of

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 170-171.

⁹ "Lines and planes are elements of an axiomatic construction of the world, common to textile art, the Semperian definition of tectonics, and the search for the formal reasons of nature in the work of Klee and Kandinsky." Antonio Armesto, "Quince casas americanas de Marcel Breuer (1938-1965). La refundación del universo doméstico como propósito experimental", in 2G. *Marcel Breuer*, n.º 17, 2001.

¹⁰ JOSEF ALBERS, quoted in: MAGDALENA DROSTE *Bauhaus 1919-1933*, Taschen, Colonia, 1998, pág. 141.

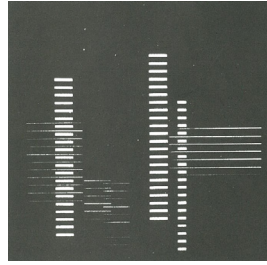
¹¹ ALEJANDRO DE LA SOTA, "Recuerdos y experiencias", *op. cit.*, p. 16. See also: "Conferencia en Barcelona", *op. cit.*, p. 171. Klee used the following words: "The elements should produce the form, but without sacrificing the total integrity. Conserving the total identity". Paul Klee, *Teorie de l'art moderne*, Bern 1956, Editions Denoël, p. 36.



7. The channel



8. Cooperative



9. Albers

De la Sota, an importance that is vividly brought to life in his own words:

“I imagine how good it would be for us to sit for eight or ten days before the block of granite that we are going to use in the project; to spend a fortnight looking at the cement in the mixer; to watch kilometres of laminates being pressed ... Small spiritual exercises”.¹²

It is no coincidence that De la Sota refers to the block of granite, since in Galicia, where he grew up, everything is built from this material. His approach is driven less by composition than by considerations of materials. Specifically, for the Civil Government building he chose to evoke the ancient Roman city of Tarraco by harnessing the materiality of stone: “Really, stone, along with wood, is the only material that nature has given us in a pre-prepared form. Everything else, we could say, is chemical”.¹³

The Roman city with which De la Sota identifies his project is the one that continues to shape the image of the present-day city. Its references are not attractive monuments but rather a series of large stone constructions such as the aqueduct, the city walls and the praetorium. Its relation to the Roman city is a suprahistorical, totally material one.

Stone, the material of the ancient city, is used to construct the abstract recesses in the building's facade. It is a three-dimensional facade that stands in contrast to the lateral facades, where the glass and marble slabs provide little thickness, illustrative of their function as a dressing. The excavated, three-dimensional material construction takes away from the representative value of the building's facade. Among the design notes on the volumetrics of the building it is interesting to consider the reference to the redesigned office tower of the Johnson Wax Buildings, by Frank Lloyd Wright, where the section is constructed around the empty space created by cutting back the concrete slabs.

Juan Navarro Baldeweg, the painter and architect who designed the bronze shield used by¹⁴ De la Sota to balance the weights of the facade, wrote an extremely precise article (as only an artist of the built form can) on abstraction in the work of Alejandro de la Sota,¹⁵ where he explains the difference between the geometric abstraction of a design by Terragni and the immediate, material abstraction apparent in the Civil Government building, which Baldeweg likens to Malevich¹⁶.

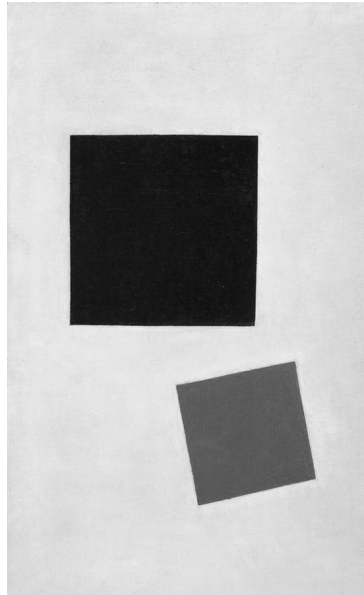
¹⁴ I had the chance to interview Juan Navarro Baldeweg. According to Baldeweg's testimony, during his learning period at Alejandro de la Sota's atelier, they were constructing the Civil Government in Tarragona. Baldeweg remembered how important it was for De la Sota that the bronze should look like a worn coin, in which the lines would almost not be perceptible to the touch.

¹⁵ “An internal guideline characterizes every project. This reasoning evolves in a demanding reflective progression which, paradigmatically, materializes in the early project of the Tarragona Civil Government building. The desire for abstraction changes things to such an extent that they cease to be things; they are transformed, converted by a process of alchemy into pure *hindrance*. And, undoubtedly, the residue that we put in the soul of the elevation of the Civil Government alongside the square in which it is located is free of all slag. The building may momentarily bring to mind Terragni, but we soon cast this great memory to one side. Perceiving the difference in his use of abstraction draws us closer to understanding his uniqueness. It is far removed from an abstract complexity arising from a laborious plastic genesis. The abstraction of the Civil Government is of a direct nature; it is an image formulated once, a sudden appearance that is closer to Malévich than Mondrian. It is difficult to find in contemporary architecture such an iconically necessary, such a hypnotic object. It is a figure of presence, like three beats of a drum that prompt the spontaneous meeting of our gaze.” NAVARRO BALDEWEG, JUAN, “Una laboriosa abstracción”, *Arquitectura Viva*, no. 3, Madrid, November 1988, p. 30.

¹⁶ “Intuitive sentiment has found new beauty in objects; the dissonance of energies that results from the encounter between two forms”. MALÉVICH, KAZIMIR, *De Cézanne au suprematisme*, Éditions L'Age d'Homme, Lausanne, 1974, p. 41.

¹² ALEJANDRO DE LA SOTA, “Alumnos de Arquitectura”, *Arquitectura*, no. 9, Madrid, 1959, p. 3; See also, MOISÉS PUENTE, (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 39.

¹³ ALEJANDRO DE LA SOTA, “Palabras en la recepción del premio PINAT 88” [1988], in MOISÉS PUENTE, (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 80. Also in *Alejandro de la Sota Arquitecto*, *op. cit.*, p. 241.



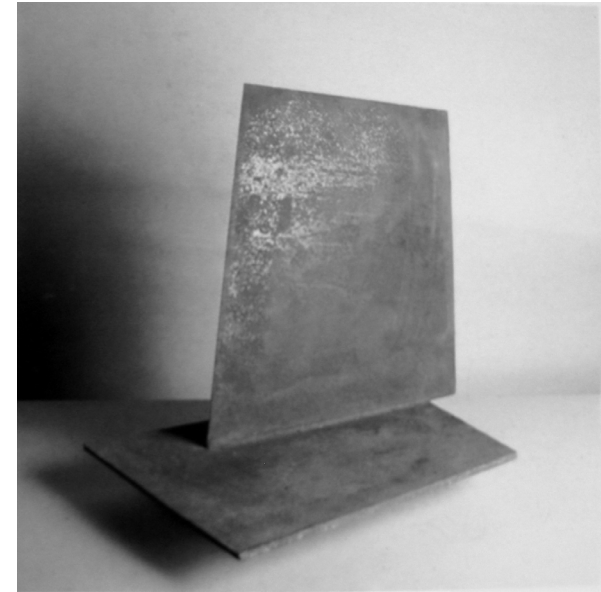
Kasimir Malévich,
"Suprematist composition", 1915.

Excavated material, Malevich.

The project for the Civil Government building was submitted in 1957, the year in which the Basque sculptor Jorge Oteiza decided to cease his work and bring his experimental endeavours to an end. Alejandro de la Sota had already expressed an interest in Oteiza in an article on the plans made by Sáenz de Oiza for a chapel on the Way of St. James:

Stone is child-like in its perfection, which is why they called upon Oteiza, who is almost child-like in character [...]. We need to think of metals even though we are using stone; we will use it in much purer, more noble forms; the contrast between solidity, heaviness and fragility, lightness. [...] Stone, we use like children; metal, we use like true engineers; and the two together, I repeat, we use as artists.¹⁷

The experimental approach of Oteiza focused on the excavation of material: the emptying of the cube, of the cylinder, of the sphere. His continual references to the abstract art of the *avant garde* are illustrated through Malevich, with the creation of an empty, infinite spatial figure situated within a frame. All of the sculptures by Oteiza that address this notion of the emptying of the cube



Jorge Oteiza, "Minimum Unit", 1959.

represent a definition of the limits of a possible space, of a hollow ready to be filled.¹⁸ So, for example, the huge number of pieces in the *Chalk Laboratory* collection reflect an attempt to represent this concept of space volumetrically. Oteiza is also a writer –of poetry, art and essays–. In what is perhaps his best-known theoretical book, *Quousque Tandem...!*, he describes his childhood:

When I was a very young boy, in Orio, my grandfather used to take us for walks to the beach. I felt drawn to these great hollows in the part of the beach furthest from the shore. I used to hide in one of them, lying down and gazing at the vast open expanse of the sky above, while everything else around me disappeared. [...] If I may, I will offer another recollection: the unforgettable satisfaction that was awoken in me in the quarry, piercing the stone. [...] It is only now that I am able to draw the association between these two memories. If my experimental work as a sculptor had not ultimately led to a single and simple empty space, I would certainly have lost these memories.¹⁹

De la Sota views the great excavations of the Roman city of Tarraco from the same perspective. Oteiza's mold seems to come between him and the city.

¹⁷ ALEJANDRO DE LA SOTA, "Una capilla en el camino de Santiago", *Revista Nacional de Arquitectura*, no. 161, Madrid, May 1955, p. 24; also in PUENTE, MOISÉS (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 32.

¹⁸ CARLOS MARTÍ ARIS, *Silencios elocuentes*, Edicions UPC, Barcelona, 1999, pp. 56-60.

¹⁹ JORGE OTEIZA, *Quousque tandem...! Ensayo de interpretación estética del alma vasca*, Auñamendi, San Sebastián, 1963, no. 75 (Oteiza did not accept the page numbering).



reforms at the Civil Government, c. 1985-86

De la Sota borrows Oteiza's ability to extend questions, to work by subtraction, adopting the *negative aesthetic* theory that Oteiza had developed:

“to carry out the creative act through successive negations, in a progressive series of eliminations, phenomenologically speaking, reducing to a parenthesis all that which we must separate in order to isolate the true goal that we are pursuing”.²⁰

But an examination of Oteiza's sculptural work also reveals examples of great beauty: for the IVth Sao Paulo Bienal, Oteiza designed a series of glass models which he used to experiment with filtered light by overlaying multiple transparent planes, his 'light walls'. In the case of the Civil Government building, the facade is made three-dimensional and the gallery and balconies become lightboxes in glass, excavated from the surface of the construction.²¹ As J. M. López Peláez recalled, when De la Sota reflected on his own design process he usually referred to 'slimming down'.

De la Sota frequently cited Klee to illustrate his principles of composition. In particular, the image he most commonly used was the *Glass houses*,²² which he described as: “A fabulous inspiration, something that isn't heavy, that isn't clearly articulated, but which has an order”.²³

Let us again compare the art of Klee and the facade of the building.²⁴ The formal analogy is immediately apparent, but in the pages of Klee's *Theory of form and figuration*²⁵ we can also establish the principles that are observed in the plans for the facade of the Civil Government building.

²⁰ Ibid., no. 63.

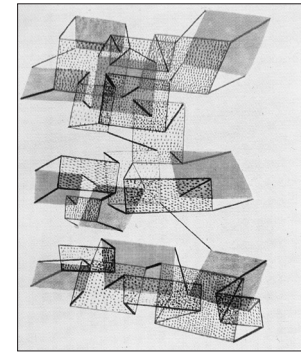
²¹ “Light too, the idea of profoundly illuminating, is dealt with by Jacobsen in a highly attractive manner”. ALEJANDRO DE LA SOTA, “Interview (with Arne Jacobsen)” [1990], in MOISÉS PUENTE, (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 1

²² De la Sota had also used this same painting to illustrate his project for a glass building for the new headquarters of the airline Aviaco (Madrid, 1975).

²³ ALEJANDRO DE LA SOTA, “Conferencia en Barcelona”, *op. cit.*, pág. 178.

²⁴ Véase: JUAN ANTONIO CORTÉS, “Lecciones de equilibrio”, *Anales de Arquitectura*, no. 6, Valladolid, 1995, pp. 181-184.

²⁵ PAUL KLEE, *Pädagogisches Skizzenbuch*, Florian Kupferberg, Maguncia/Berlin, 1965. (*Pedagogical sketchbook*, Faber, London, 1968).



Paul Klee, “Glass houses”, n.d.

*figuration*²⁶ we can also establish the principles that are observed in the plans for the facade of the Civil Government building.

In the second chapter of the *Pädagogisches Skizzenbuch*²⁶, having defined the meaning of dimensions, Klee addresses the theme of balance, illustrating it with the theory of stones placed vertically on top of a foundation stone to form a tower. In the same way, De la Sota seemingly expressed his doubts about the project and its functional purpose, first by introducing the consideration of balance and the weight of the forms, and then with the shifting of the axis, which can be seen explicitly in the main facade.

De la Sota hides the two different functions, but also the necessary representativeness of the building, while at the same time expressing his espousal of modern architecture through the abstraction of forms. The principles of modern art are apparent in the facade: lines and *chiaroscuro* are, in fact, the fundamental forms of plastic expression.²⁷ But a later concept also runs through the experience of modern art and the pages of Klee's notebooks: movement, which is transmitted in the building's facade through the disarticulation of the galleries.

“Movement is the source of all change. In Lessing's *Laocoön*, on which we squandered study time when we were young, much fuss is made about the difference between temporal and spatial art, but looking into the matter more clearly we find that all this is but a scholastic delusion for space, too, is a temporal concept. When a dot begins to move and becomes a line, this requires time. Likewise, when a moving line

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ The smallest of these elements is the line, a question only of size [...].The values of light and dark, or tonality are of a different nature: the numerous gradations between white and black. This second element raises issues of weight”. PAUL KLEE, “On modern art”, in *Theory of form and figuration*, *op. cit.*

²⁸ PAUL KLEE, “Credo del creador”, *op. cit.*

Empty space as a unity of contrasts

Light, balance and gravity are the core themes in the sculptural, pictorial and architectural compositions of Juan Navarro Baldeweg. Let us be guided, then, by his words in addressing the final aspect of the project. Navarro Baldeweg, in his description of another design by De la Sota for Alcludia, highlights a fundamental question: the relation between empty space and the unity of contrasts.

The drawings reveal an enviable artistic capacity to assemble different things in a single impulse. Everything appears to be defined between extremes, covering distances in a back and forth of observations... This manifestation of concrete existence is far from banal. The drawings are emotive through their constant melding of the necessary and the contingent, the near and the far, the static and the mobile in different scales, situations and rhythms.²⁹

The unity of contrasts that we have encountered at various points in this analysis is an explicit reference to Breuer, and a genuine point of reference in the building's construction, where the interior light strikes a contrast with the black hollows, and the dark masses of the exterior are transformed into lightboxes. We can precisely describe at least three architectural solutions that make use of this emptiness, in addition to the balconies already described: the villa with a central patio that De la Sota planned for the roof of the building, with its introverted planimetric design; the representative open space of the second floor, where the ceiling is transformed into a light source and the elements of which it is composed appear to fluctuate, arranged so as to contribute to the realisation of the space;³⁰ and, finally, the open space in which the general public are attended on the ground floor, the true covered area that the architect contrasts with the banality of the plaza designed by speculators, which contains only heavy vertical and horizontal marble elements; the bench in the lobby and the benches in the new public space, which appear to lie on the ground in a manner strongly reminiscent of contemporary works of minimalist art.

My aim at this time is not to open new fronts of inquiry but rather to close existing ones, recalling the custom in Spanish architecture of always monitoring

developments in Scandinavian architecture, asking what lies beyond the atrium of the Stockholm Public Library building or the hall of the Gothenburg City Hall, design by Asplund,³¹ or perhaps the atrium at the entrance to Jacobsen's National Bank of Denmark building. What is there but the beauty of carving the same space into the material? And what is all the subsequent work of De la Sota if not the structural, technical and spatial confirmation of this empty space?³²

²⁹ JUAN NAVARRO BALDEWEG, "Construir y habitar", *AV monografías*, n. 68, Madrid, november-december 1997, pp. 30-31. See as well: IÑAKI ÁBALOS, JOSEP LLINÀS & MOISÉS PUENTE, *Alejandro de la Sota*, Fundación Caja de Arquitectos, Barcelona, 2009, p. 491.

³⁰ In reference to the interiors of the Civil Government in Tarragona, Josep Llinàs draws our attention to the fact that the divisions do not rest on the floor: "The divisions are not guided by any sort of formal system. They dance on the surface of the floor: there is no skirting, so the feet of the wall are not imprisoned between two rails that rise from the floor". Josep Llinàs, "El Gobierno Civil de Tarragona", in LLUIS ORTEGA & MOISÉS PUENTE, (eds.), *Sagues de esquina*, Pre-Textos, Valencia, 2002, p. 86.

³¹ JOSÉ MANUEL LÓPEZ-PELÁEZ, *La arquitectura de Gunnar Asplund*, Fundación Caja de Arquitectos, Barcelona, 2002.

³² It is sufficient to think of the inverted roof truss of the gymnasium of the Maravillas school (Madrid, 1960-1962), the cross-section of which is the focus of the whole project.

VOID AS UNITY OF CONTRASTS

ALEJANDRO DE LA SOTA, CIVIL GOVERNMENT OF TARRAGONA

Simona Pierini

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She has worked with Gio Vercelloni, publishing several books on Milan and its iconography, and with Giorgio Grassi, editing his monograph published by Electa (1996). In 1998, she worked alongside Carlos Martí and Josep Maria Quetglas in Barcelona researching the work of Josep Maria Sostres and José Antonio Coderch. As a result of this research she wrote *Passaggio in Iberia* (Marinotti 2008), and *Alejandro de la Sota, dalla materia all'astrazione* (Maggioli 2010).

During the academic year 2011-2012 she worked with Bruno Reichlin on architecture criticism at the EPFL, Lausanne. Recently she published *Housing Primer, le forme della residenza nella città contemporanea* (Maggioli 2012). As well as her design work, she has also carried out research into architectural design in an attempt to understand city architecture by using history as a source of contemporary design.