

**VOLCANIC BEAUTY**

**On the architecture of Sáenz de Oíza**

PUBLISHED IN

Arquitectos 129. Madrid, 1993

La Idea Construida. Ed. COAM. Madrid, 1996

Textos Críticos. Ediciones Asimétricas. Madrid, 2017

## VOCAL BEAUTY

### On the architecture of Sáenz de Oíza

Like a volcano. This is the architecture of Sáenz de Oíza. Like one of the most beautiful spectacles that nature can offer us. Like a volcano. Like when, before exploding, the earth begins to tremble, to beat, to palpitate with primordial force. Or as when, once the fire has been vomited, the fiery magmatic tongue ravages the slopes and valleys. Such is the architecture of Sáenz de Oíza: fiery, cosmic, telluric. Like a volcano.

If to represent the Architecture of Alejandro de la Sota, we proposed from his hand the limpid head of Nefertiti, as an image of unfading beauty, to try to summarize the Architecture of Oíza, we should resort to the gorgonic head of Medusa: imposing, thundering, tremendous.

Because it is not that the labels that have been cyclically placed on the master fall off or come off: he corrodes them, he destroys them because there is no label capable of resisting his sulfuric architecture, so much architectural intensity, so much architectural will.

And if Sota's quiet music, to the chords of Bach, tames the wild beasts of the Form, silencing them, Oíza's apotheotic music, with Wagner's score, devours the Form to manifest it later with expressive and very personal accents.

How could we then explain, trying to analyze it, this Architecture that slips through our hands like shining mercury, that escapes rebellious and contradictory to any diagnosis?

### RADICAL RADICAL

Oíza's architecture, like his life, is a rosary of radical accounts. With the radicality demanded by the best architecture

Radical rationalism of his chapel in Santiago. Radical expressionism of his Talavera house. Radical organicism of his White Towers, of non-existent utopian whiteness. Radical and accurate technologism of its Bank of Bilbao. Radical magnetic presence of his auditorium in Santander. Radical oceanic transparency of its museum in Las Palmas. Radical walled conclusion of his houses in Madrid's M 30. Radical Roman fortress of his Triana in Seville. Radical renaissance inspiration of his bullring at the Ferial de Madrid. Radical radicalism of Oíza.

He always convinces us from his own conviction seasoned with his torrential verb, sprinkled with an unbelievable self-deprecation that carries an implicit true humility. Overwhelming rapture, uncontainable cataract, erupting volcano. Inclito uberrimo architect. Fertile in enlightened ideas and abundant in powerful forms.

To try to analyze all his works would be absolutely impossible. I will attempt a peculiar analysis of two of them, perhaps the most interesting, using the images of the Crater and the Geode. As befits his volcanic architecture.

## BABELIC CRATERS

With the demolition of the walls and the arrival of the technology that makes full constructive verticality possible, contemporary architecture raises a question that is still unresolved today: How should the vertical meet the horizontal plane of the earth? Under what concepts should architecture resolve this crucial encounter between the concentrated accumulation of gravitational loads and the earth on which it must be distributed, supported, resting?

The architect then intones a response that is as personal as it is universal. Oíza, whose dream would be to erect the most beautiful tower of the third millennium (I already know that, for that purpose, he has Calvino's book under his pillow), has already been able to respond, and twice in a row, better than anyone else to this request. With the crater as an answer.

Early vertical architecture, including the first skyscrapers, followed the logic of building a wider base. In the same way that the base does with the column. Adolf Loos would take this to its ultimate consequences in his magnificent proposal for the Chicago Tribune in 1922.

Then, giving the silence for an answer, the most recent architecture has moved the meeting to the underground, in order not to show it on the piano terra. Then, they have put the lid on it as if it were nothing. Like Foster in Hong Kong. Curious symbol of our dubitative era this making mute for the forum.

Oíza, affirmative and defiant, lashes out at the earth, breaking it with the Jupiterian rays of gravity. And he creates a beautiful crater that he then restores by accentuating it to clearly express the nature of this powerful encounter. The crater of Torres Blancas, and that of the Banco de Bilbao, each with its own language, are proof of his attitude. Can anyone imagine the fantastic crater through which his future Tower of Babel will emerge from the earth?

I cannot but recall here a memorable visit of Kenneth Frampton to Madrid, when something happened with the Banco de Bilbao de Oíza. The then Chairman of Columbia had been summoned to a boring congress on the unsolvable problems of large cities. And once in Madrid, they took him for a walk, so that he would learn who knows what, through the thousands of housing units they call social housing. Having done his homework, he asked me for only two things: to see the Goya paintings in the Prado and the Banco de Bilbao de Oíza. The joy of the Prado is easily imaginable. And the most pleasant surprise was his amazement at the tower of Oíza. He circled the iron obelisk numerous times, exclaiming incontinently: "Amazing! Amazing!". And he went on and on in glowing praise. Once again, the outsiders recognizing and admiring what the insiders insist on undervaluing. The Bank of Bilbao, in addition to resolving that already studied crater encounter, stands in contemporary architecture as an exemplary tower. With an original structural invention that responds to all the numerous mechanical problems that exist there. With a smooth skin that, like a sacred chameleon, changes its appearance with the passing of the days and seasons. From the steely, icy gray of winter to the warm,

honey-gold of autumn. From the serene whitish whiteness of the rain, to the radiant bright blue of the sun. The consequence of that visit was the inclusion of this building of Oíza, image included, in the widely spread Critical History of Modern Architecture, written by Frampton.

#### AS A GEODA

And if its towers are radical, beautiful and well established, the houses of the M 30 in Oíza are no less so. Like a Geode of volcanic beauty. The splendid wall is the pride of its inhabitants who, with more sense than those who have criticized it, keep it impeccable with the pride of knowing they possess something important. The houses of the M 30 are a piece of architecture of the highest order. A constructed idea. His proposal is more than reasonable: to close the houses to chaos, noise and pollution, and open them to air, sun and tranquility. A masterpiece of a master for a society incapable of understanding it in its narrow-minded ignorance. Like throwing pearls to the pigs. Like a Geode that keeps its singular wealth to protect it.

#### THE SUN AND THE STARS

If Oíza were American, or Italian or French, his genius would be universally known, but this country is still different. But this country is still different. Isn't it curious that, at this stage of the game, there is still not a single book on a figure of Oíza's stature? With as much or more stature than any of the stars that make up this quasi-cinematic firmament that pretends to "artificially" illuminate today's architecture. But it is already known that Architecture is only possible with light, the light of the sun. I believe that the time has come, and these latest recognitions at a social level such as the Prince of Asturias Award may give rise to it, for the official bodies (read Colleges of Architects, or the Higher Council, or the Ministry of Culture, or the School of Architecture) to take action on the matter.

Petrified fire, overwhelming force, contained passion. All images to circumnavigate the multiple facets of an architect, Oíza, of a polymorphic Architecture.

Exclaimed Neil Armstrong, the astronaut, looking at the globe from his devilish contraption, "I'm looking at the Earth from here. It's big and bright and beautiful." So, big, bright and beautiful, cosmic as the Earth, is the Architecture of Sáenz de Oíza.