

**A GOOD THING IS TWICE AS GOOD IF IT IS BRIEF**

**Logic, precision and certainty in Alejandro de la Sota's architecture.**

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Sota Conference at Columbia University

When I was asked to give this talk at Columbia University, and told that it was to last only 15 minutes, I thought how well this brevity of time suited Alejandro de la Sota's architecture: an architecture built with logic, precision and certainty. A precise and certain logical architecture that Kenneth Frampton aptly synthesizes as "laconic" when he writes about Sota in his *Studies in Tectonic Culture*.

I was lucky to have Alejandro de La Sota as my first professor of projects in Madrid. There was a mutual enchantment, and he injected me with the architecture virus from which I have never got rid of. I still have the slip of paper in which, in his own handwriting, in addition to awarding me the highest qualification, he stamps his signature with a significant title of professor.

Choosing to talk about him the Maravillas Gymnasium that the master built in Madrid in 1966 is in itself very significant. For me and for many Spanish architects it is one of the *pièce de resistance* of contemporary Spanish architecture. If I had to choose just one work from this period, I would choose this marvelous Gimnasio Maravillas by Sota.

And I will give reasons for this.

1- With a crushing waste of **logic**, Sota sets up a very clear idea. In front of the busy street, he builds a large retaining wall that supports an open-air playground at the top. This wall is the facade of a box that Sota fills with light from the south taken from above. To build the roof, he uses large composite beams that let in the light that illuminates the main space. Then, he takes advantage of the large size of these beams to put suspended classrooms inside. And under the floor of the box, a basement with swimming pools. It takes advantage of everything.

A clear idea that Sota synthesizes in a beautiful drawing of the cross section. An idea as logical as the head of the person who conceived it. The master knows well that Architecture is a constructed idea.

2- With impeccable **precision** he defines the structure. Large beams composed of diagonal bars capable of supporting the loads of the classrooms and the upper courtyard, and freeing the large interior space covered by them. A space that is able to move us when we are in it. A structure that not only transmits the loads but, more importantly, establishes the order of the space. Architecture that builds space with gravity.

3- With absolute **certainty**, it works with light. And so the Maravillas de Sota Gymnasium can also be read as a great "light transformer". The light from the south floods in through the tall, large window and not only tensions the main space, but also adequately illuminates the classrooms that are located between the beams. And all this tinged with

that deshabillé, that something of imperfection with which all of Sota's architecture is tinged. An architecture that builds time with light.

Once again the attempt to make architecture a constructed idea, tempering light and gravity to dominate space and time. An architecture understood as a constructed idea, gravity that constructs space and light that constructs time. Nothing more and nothing less.

N.B.

During the opening of the exhibition "On Site New Architecture" In Spain at MOMA last February 7, I was thinking of Sota and Oíza and Fisac and Carvajal and Cano Lasso, the masters. And how far they all were from these vanity fairs. And how, having been my students, many of those who were now exhibiting at the MOMA, my pride was greater than my vanity. And also in Kenneth Frampton and his generosity during my recent stay at Columbia University, and always.

New York, February 2006