

AN ARCHITECTURE OF ABYSMAL BEAUTY

**On the occasion of the awarding of the Gold Medal of Architecture to
Javier Carvajal**

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Olivier Messiaen's Quartet for the end of time sounds in the air. A music of abysmal beauty. A precious and precise music that, to me, like the French composer the abyss of birds evokes the architecture of Javier Carvajal. Both, Messiaen's music and Carvajal's architecture, are characterized by their great precision.

Precision is a quality that defines our architect well. Precise is an adjective that fits Javier Carvajal's architecture perfectly. When I wrote that "he "manages to put dimensions to the water", to express his precise precision, I added that he also puts "dimensions to the air", which is what we architects really do. With the wisdom of one who, after proclaiming, as our architect insisted over and over again to his students, that architecture is an "art with reason of necessity", knows well that Beauty, also that of architecture, is of primary necessity for man. Beauty that Javier Carvajal takes from the air, chiseling it with his master hand. The air thus chiseled, as the poet reveals, "is serene and dressed in beauty and unused light. With the beauty and light of architecture.

Javier Carvajal was born in Barcelona the same year that, also in Barcelona, Antonio Gaudí died, in 1926. His life, his career and his architecture have been very brilliant from the beginning. From his Extraordinary Prize in the Final Degree Project in 1953. And as soon as he finished his degree, in 1955 he won the competition for the building of the Escuela de Altos Estudios Mercantiles on the Diagonal in Barcelona, which he built on his return from Rome, where he went on a scholarship to the Spanish Academy that same year, 1955. In 1963 he beat the best Spanish architects of the time who were competing for the Spanish pavilion at the World's Fair in New York. And he built it. And the American architects surrender to him by awarding him the highest awards, the Prize for the best foreign architecture at the New York World's Fair from the American Institute of Architects, the AIA. And they tempt him to undertake the American adventure, which he renounces to return to work in Spain. In 1965, in the competitive examinations in which he won his Chair of Projects at the Madrid School of Architecture, Oíza withdrew because "the young and brilliant Carvajal" was running. And a few years later, in 1968, German architects awarded him the Fritz Schumacher of the University of Hannover for the best work of architecture built that year for the beautiful houses of Somosaguas. And in 1971 he became Dean of the Colegio O. de Arquitectos de Madrid. And later, Director of the School of Architecture of Barcelona and Las Palmas.

All the awards, all the positions and commissions, all the publications, all the recognitions. But this, as you know, in our country is more than dangerous and unforgivable. And suddenly there was a long silence that he has positively described as an inner exile. And in all this time, his quiet dedication to teaching between Madrid and Pamplona. And now, at last, after so long, the gold medal of Architecture.

If we had to order his work, according to his most outstanding creative moments, I would do it in three clear periods:

- With the blue house of the canyons in Madrid's Plaza de Cristo Rey in 1954, which not only resists, but gains with the passage of time, opens the first period. Then came the Escuela de Altos Estudios Mercantiles of which Carvajal himself said that it was "of a rationalism with more echoes of Terragni than of the other masters, and with echoes of the rationalism of GATCPAC". Many years later, Peter Eisenman, on a visit to Barcelona, was not shy in his praise of this work. From that period is the exquisite Spanish pavilion at the Milan Art Triennial in 1957, where he dares to wrap the pieces of the artists in a prodigious wire mesh. There he took a very young Chillida, among others. His modernity still surprises us today. And he was awarded the gold medal of the Triennial. And from 1959 is the resounding wall of the Pantheon of the Spaniards in the Campo Verano Cemetery in Rome. Then the church of Vitoria, where he materialized the spiritual gesture of joining hands, achieving a space that still surprises us today. And in 1960, the sober School of Telecommunications Engineers in the University City of Madrid. These four exquisite works were done in collaboration with José María García de Paredes, another of the key figures of Spanish Architecture, and come from their common stay in Rome as boarders at the Spanish Academy.
- The Spanish pavilion at the New York World's Fair will mark a high point in his career and open a second period, with even greater public recognition. From the praises of Salvador Dalí to those of Ada Louise Huxtable, the most important architecture critic of that time in the New York Times. Later would come the Somosaguas houses that are already the history of contemporary Spanish architecture. Carlos Saura filmed *La Madriguera* there with Geraldine Chaplin wandering through Carvajal's architecture. Also from 1966 are the impeccable apartments on Montesquinza Street. And the housing and office complex of León, prologue of what would later, in 1972, be the Torre de Valencia. And still in 1974, shortly before the *Adriática*, the impeccable Banco Industrial de León on Serrano Street.
- He concludes with a last period in which there are fewer works, but also very interesting: the Rodriguez Villa House in La Moraleja in 1982 and the Cardenal House of 1985 in Pozuelo. In 1988 the Spanish embassy in Warsaw and, for the Seville Expo, the hotel in which white and powerful cylinders emerge forcefully on a base of rotund concrete.

Is there any way at this point to redefine Javier Carvajal's unmistakable architecture? So clear and recognizable that it has even produced what he likes so little or nothing: to be copied by those who want to be more papist than the Pope.

Javier Carvajal shows an amazing ability to articulate spaces, to link them. As did the architects of the Alhambra that he admires so much. Plans, elevations and sections are concatenated with such fluidity that the response to the game raised by the architect seems to our view as the most natural thing in the world. Translating into forms of enormous strength. But it is not form for form's sake, but form in which the conditioning factors and requirements demanded by the architectural act converge with certainty. With the same exigency with which he demanded it in his project classes.

I still remember the long, standing ovation he received at the Madrid School of Architecture when, in its packed auditorium, he cut off his ponytail at the end of a cold winter in 1991. Because that was what the retirement canons of an inadequate law established. But laws change, ponytails grow, and bullfighters always return to the bullring.

This Medal now recognizes a key figure in the history of Spanish architecture. And it tries once again to fit the pieces of the complicated puzzle, always unfinished, of that history. As my students at the Zurich School of Architecture exclaimed when Carvajal presented his ideas there and held unforgettable critical sessions: "This is a true architect". Javier Carvajal, the master.

The precious and precise music of Javier Carvajal's architecture continues to sound in the air. As precious and precise as the music of Olivier Messiaen. An architecture of abysmal beauty.