

IT ALWAYS COMES BACK TO MANDERLEY

Alas y Casariego's Centro building: Architecture with moderation

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This is the sound of a voice-over at the beginning of Alfred Hitchcock's legendary and splendid film *Rebecca*. The protagonist returns in that first scene to the superb mansion with the certainty of one who is fulfilling something inescapable: to return. "One always returns to Manderley".

Today I returned to the Centro de Alas y Casariego building. And I walked carefully through its octagonal staircase, full of light, as I used to, years ago, in the early 70s. The building had just been completed and was very close to my newly opened studio. On the first floor, still landscaped, there was a cafeteria that we frequented and that answered to the sonorous name of Agarsimón. And inside, a few floors above, there was a copy house, Covacho, which we would never stop frequenting, although it changed location several times. It still remains nearby today. And always, on the occasion of the copies or the coffee, I would walk that staircase that exerted on me a special fascination. Fascination that extended to the whole building and that today, in this strange revision, has returned.

That architecture, Italianate without us knowing it (today we would relate it to some works such as the Corso de Europa in Milan, by Magistretti), had a great attraction. It spoke of freedom in form (the octagon with which the courtyard and staircase were laid out), of novelty in the materials (exposed concrete as masonry), of expressiveness in the structure (the metal beams of the ground floor). There was something of novelty and freshness, and of simplicity, that attracted us enormously. And those loose steps, as if they were Miesian. And the strength of that canopy that, in a building that was called Centro and had a symmetrical floor plan, marked an entrance that... was not made through the center.

I got my hands on the issue of *Arquitectura* magazine in which it was published. The recognition of the work increased that relationship of admiration for that building. The Monki coffee factory also appeared there, to which I immediately extended my positive opinion. That other stupendous Miesian piece by Alas y Casariego was later inexplicably demolished.

The return to the Centro building and its analysis, now more rigorous, leads me to the consideration of how the architectures that are conceptually capable of resisting time are those born of the most solid principles. And they are capable of remaining for History. To last.

In its relationship with the city, the new city, the Centro building appears as a total, resounding volume that has an active presence.

For its encounter with the ground, the architects created a podium that picks up the unevenness coming from the rear facade. The first floor is released with precise and efficient mechanisms. The facade (paradoxical curtain wall) is unloaded with an

expressive metal structure. The enclosure is set back to avoid future disasters. The garden, at the rear, is introduced as far as possible. And the entrance is established outside the axis of symmetry with which the building is composed.

For the facades, the path of order is chosen. On a general grid pattern, it is opened or closed as appropriate. More open to the north. More protected, by discreet overhangs, to the south. With different options to the east and west. And always crystalline corners, as if to lighten the whole. The opaque walls are made of exposed concrete, as a kind of masonry. Even today, after almost thirty years, these facades are still impeccable.

The interior continues to surprise with the strength of the octagonal shape chosen for the courtyard that crosses and presides over the building. And it is surprising both for its great luminosity and for the special continuity with which the relationship between the adjoining floors is endowed. Functionally it is of great clarity, with communication and service cores on both sides of the courtyard, leaving the entire space free in relation to the facades.

We can thus conclude that the resistance to time of this building, both materially and conceptually, speaks well of the architecture and the position of its authors. Logic as a basic instrument and order, rigor and restraint as ever-present ingredients, produce an architecture that, if it had to be adjectivized, I would describe as adjusted and measured. In short, it is that dispositio that the classics demanded of any architecture that was worthwhile. And this one deserves it. An Architecture with moderation.