

EXHIBITING IN THE AIR

On the architecture of Manuel Blanco Lage

2024

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Nothing here, nothing there. As if by magic, the magnificent bindings of the Spanish Royal Collections appeared before us, as if floating in the air, and we felt that they were the most valuable thing in the world and all thanks to the genius of the architect whose montage had made this miracle possible. More than a montage, it was so beautiful that it might be best described as an artistic installation. And it was all so clear and understandable.

Have you ever imagined an architect designing with air? Well, it seems to me that is what the best architects are doing these days. Moreover, as Fisac so rightly said, they have the ability to humanize that air. "Architecture is a piece of humanized air", said the maestro.

Can you imagine an architect designing an exhibition that succeeds in displaying the exhibits in all their splendor, but making the design that supports them disappear? Well, that's exactly what happens with the marvelous exhibits of the architect Manuel Blanco, as if made with air and showcasing the contents on display.

Can you remember what the frame of Velazquez's painting *las Meninas* looks like? I can't either.

Rome. Nothing here, nothing there - with a wave of his magic wand Manuel Blanco arranged the elements of his exhibition on Rome in the halls of the Canal de Madrid in such a way that it was like a Roman museum in Rome itself. Not only that, it all made perfect sense, with a profound pedagogical logic.

Athens. Nothing here, nothing there. In the exhibition "We the Cities" in Athens we saw our Spanish cities viewed from an unusual perspective, with the focus on their beautiful modern appearance, highlighting the best architecture created in Spain in recent years. I have a wonderful memory of the divine Irene Papas walking delightedly through the exhibition hand in hand with Manuel Blanco, who was a great friend of hers.

Even the titles of his exhibitions are perfectly chosen. And in all of them - and Manuel Blanco has a long history of designing exhibitions, all quite different and with highly original concepts - that disappearing element is there like a beating heart, so that the exhibit itself is all the more present. More than humility, for an architect should never be humble, it is a question of the most impeccable and absolute professionalism, of a certain *je ne sais quoi* that hovers in the air, then disappears, revealing what a great architect he is.

All too often both in temporary and in permanent exhibitions we witness a desire for notoriety on the part of the architect who designed the exhibition, where the exhibits themselves can be overshadowed, or drowned out by too much noise, all for the greater glory of the designer of the frame.

Can you imagine if one day Velázquez's Las Meninas was to appear in a frame that distracted our attention from the work of the great master?

Manuel Blanco is silent in his exhibitions. He invites the spectator to a silence that prefaces the respect he generates towards the works on exhibit. And he does so with great pedagogical sensitivity. Just as it should be. I can only thank him for putting the very best of himself into my exhibitions.

I made such a wise choice when, at the suggestion of Roberto Turégano, I asked him to curate my exhibition at S.R. Crown Hall in Chicago back in 2002. The invitation had come from Francisco de Blas, at the time head of the Cervantes Institute in Chicago, and for whom I had designed his house in Madrid, and Donna Robertson, then Dean of the IIT College of Architecture in Chicago, housed in the Mies Van der Rohe building, Crown Hall. It was like a dream. For there, in the arms of Mies, Manuel Blanco created a beautiful exhibition that was very Mies and also very Campo Baeza. It was a resounding success.

Soon afterward, we were asked to do an exhibition for the Urban Center in New York. On that occasion, the hall, in the Rockefeller Center – such a great location - was much smaller. There, too, he knew exactly how to place the right elements in the right way. Like jewels. Everyone praised the contents and their delicate container: Richard Meier and Kenneth Frampton, Steven Holl and Massimo Vignelli - and, take it from me, Vignelli knows his stuff!

Later the exhibition travelled to Hagia Irene in Istanbul. This time, the space was not just stunning, it was immense. Once again, our architect mastered the scale of the exhibition, which filled that magnificent space perfectly. On this occasion it was Tadao Ando who was lavish in his praise of the successful installation and its author.

Later it was the turn of the Palladian Basilica, where only architects who have already gone down in history are exhibited. On that occasion Manuel Blanco demonstrated his finest skills as a goldsmith and delivered a beautiful exhibition that would have delighted Palladio himself.

And then at the Toto Gallery.Ma in Tokyo where I was invited to create an exhibition which, having initially been tempted to design myself, I handed over to Manuel Blanco's capable hands. And once again I made the right choice. “The Tree of Life” was the title of the installation, and that's exactly what it was. The hundreds of drawings suspended in the air looked like thousands of leaves on that tree that had grown from the life of an architect. A few scale models provided the appropriate counterpoint. And, there they were, all the great Japanese architects from Tadao Ando to Toshio Nakamura, who for many years was the soul of A+U. And Toyo Ito, and Kengo Kuma and Kazuyo Sejima, generous with their presence and all applauding Manuel Blanco's magnificent installation.

And recently at the MAXXI in Rome. Is it possible to exhibit the essential radicalism that I pursue in my work in the arms of the most exuberant architect of the moment, Zaha

Hadid? Manuel Blanco made it possible. Once again he opted for silence and in the middle of all the hubbub he created a haven of peace where the works on display were exactly where they belonged. He succeeded in withdrawing himself, in withdrawing us, to an enclosed area of the vast museum, managing his forces so well that the exhibition won that Roman battle. The efficacious support of Margherita Guccione was key to the success of this exhibition.

The last exhibition of Manuel Blanco that I had the opportunity to visit is that of the Bookbindings from the Royal Collections at the Royal Palace in Madrid, which is where this article started out. Naturally enough, he designed it with Emilio Tuñón, who is not only the designer of the new building, but also one of the best architects in Spain today. In an atmosphere imbued with sobriety, it seemed as if the books, in those wonderful urns so typical of Manuel Blanco, were floating. And in the midst of all of them, a most beautiful piece appeared: a circular crown suspended in the air by cables. As books are heavy, especially the best bound ones, Manuel Blanco called on Víctor Martínez Segovia, one of the greatest civil engineers in Spain, to give him advice and make the calculations. In everything he does Manuel Blanco always surrounds himself with top-notch collaborators. As fate would have it, that magnificent piece was the last ever calculated by Víctor Martínez Segovia, who was no longer there to attend the inauguration.

And all this exhibition work demonstrates Manuel Blanco's stature as an architect. His exhibitions are true architectural projects presented with such clarity that allows for a complete understanding of everything he wants to transmit. With consistently brilliant formal results that never veil the brightness of what is on exhibit. Something the best architects have always done.

It is altogether unsurprising that Manuel Blanco is one of the most distinguished professors at the Madrid School of Architecture (ETSAM), which he now directs, and where he is very much loved by his students. He has that gift for teaching, which is evident even in his exhibition catalogs, which are also essential reading matter on these subjects. To that end, he calls on the best graphic designers, like Roberto Turégano, and the best printers, like Tito Ferreira.

Manuel Blanco is not only a full professor and director of the ETSAM. He is also one of the most international personalities at our university. I remember a recent lunch at Columbia University with Kenneth Frampton where they talked about their thousand mutual friendships and the academic and cultural life of the American city. Frampton was amazed with him, and I with both of them. Kenneth Frampton has publicly stated many times that ETSAM is the best school of architecture in the world. ETSAM, in appreciation, has named Frampton an Honorary Doctor of Architecture in 2020.

There is a wonderful text by Ortega, *Frame, Clothing and Ornament*, which could have been written for Manuel Blanco. It is so in keeping with the spirit in which Manuel Blanco makes his exhibitions: "the frame does not in itself attract attention. This can be proved quite easily. Try to think of the paintings you know best, and you will discover that you cannot remember how they are framed". And he continues: "The close connection between

painting and frame is by no means accidental. They are mutually dependent.” Furthermore: “And an accent does not accentuate itself, but the letter underneath it”. It is my fervent wish that these words of mine with which I have framed the figure of Manuel Blanco, may serve to showcase his extraordinary work.

In September I had the privilege of seeing the Royal Collections guided by Manuel Blanco and accompanied by Miguel Quismondo and Ines.

The experience was marvelous. The container, the work of Emilio Tuñón and Luis Moreno Mansilla, is splendid, and the contents, the permanent exhibition of Manuel Blanco's collections, are not only outstanding but also very beautiful.

Sometimes we architects design works that are perfect, logical and rational but the result is frankly bland. This has happened to me at times. On other occasions, however, the miracle happens, and the result can be very beautiful.

The Royal Collections has done it all. The linear scheme with its off-center axes and corresponding extensions, in the mode of squares, is perfect and understandable. The sections of loose walls, responding to the different scale are extraordinarily precise. The materials and color are just right. And the result, forgive me for repeating myself, is quite beautiful.

The Guarrazar treasure, which is exhibited there, is perfect. And so is everything else. If I had to rate it, I would give it a first class honors grade. Congratulations to Manuel Blanco and Emilio Tuñón and to the Patrimonio Nacional.

Manuel Blanco Lage is now in his second term as director of the Madrid School of Architecture, the ETSAM He is also president of the Confederation of Schools of Architecture of Spain. And under his direction, the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando has awarded its Medal of Honor to the School. A well-deserved honor for a director who has brought worldwide recognition to the ETSAM.