

## SESIONES DE CRÍTICA DE ARQUITECTURA The change in the architectural debate in the Spain of the 1960s

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### Abstract

*The journal Arquitectura was reissued in January 1959 as a mouthpiece of the Madrid Institute of Architects (COAM). This brought to an end the period of the Revista Nacional de Arquitectura, the journal which replaced it after the Civil War under the control of the Franco regime. Curiously, moving from one journal to another did not involve many changes in how it was managed, and it would remain for over a decade in the hands of Carlos de Miguel, its director since the late forties. Despite this 'apparent' continuity, the independence achieved from government bodies brought about important changes in focus, mechanisms and strategies of dissemination and architectural criticism.*

*This paper aims to consider this shift in thinking, topics and agents by reviewing the 'Sesiones de Crítica de Arquitectura' (SCAs, Architecture Critic Sessions). These were regular meetings organized by Carlos de Miguel in which there were interactive debates about an issue, previously introduced by a speaker. The sessions started in 1951 and were held regularly all through the fifties. However, they were interrupted in the early sixties and later reorganized, but this time with significant differences with regard to the former period. The SCAs in the sixties were less frequent and included guest speakers with special expertise in the fields of design and social sciences. Urban conditions began to attract greater attention and, overall, disagreements and differences of approach and interests between the two generations who attended the meetings became evident: the older architects, who started the sessions as a discussion forum about tradition and modernity, and the younger ones, who called into question rational values of modernism defended by their masters and went for pursuing new perspectives in the development of architectural culture.*

**Keywords:** *Revista Nacional de Arquitectura*, Spanish architecture periodicals, Carlos de Miguel, *Sesiones de Crítica de Arquitectura (SCA)*.

Carlos de Miguel won the competition for running *Revista Nacional de Arquitectura* (RNA) in 1948, only seven years after its beginnings. To some extent, RNA resumed the trajectory of *Arquitectura*, the original mouthpiece of the *Colegio Oficial de Arquitectos de Madrid* (COAM) until it was suspended in 1936 due to the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War.

Following the end of the conflict, in 1941 the *Dirección General de Arquitectura* (DGA) changed its name and purpose in order to adapt it to the new requirements of the Franco regime. During its first years, RNA was almost exclusively dedicated to the great works promoted by the DGA. The Pre-Civil War modernity disappeared from its pages to make way for a catalogue of 'national' buildings supported by the state.

However, when De Miguel became in charge of the journal, the DGA had already transferred it to the *Consejo Superior de Arquitectos* due to its high-cost publishing. This new acquired independence of the Franco regime allowed him to lead the gradual transformation of the magazine.

We are then interested in all the opinions about any of the current architectural issues, and everybody is invited to present them in order to [...] help us to focus that topics on new trends and solutions.

Thus, we attempt to create a new and positive interest, and our effort will not have been useless if it leads us to design more modern and better architecture. (Preámbulo, 1948)

During the first years, Carlos de Miguel was taking initiatives to transform the journal. Although the changes were subtle and gradual, RNA became increasingly more interesting: new topics, new layout, new illustrators, new sections, etcetera. Despite the government censorship, the director was working to put RNA on the same level other European magazines.

In that time, one of the greatest contributions of Carlos de Miguel was the launch of the *Sesiones de Crítica de Arquitectura* (SCAs), which early became an unmissable event for all those architects interested in architecture criticism. The SCAs were meetings held by RNA with a fixed structure: a speaker invited by the

organizing gave a presentation, followed by a discussion on the topic. Afterwards, the transcript of the SCA was usually published in the journal, allowing an understanding of an important part of the Spanish architectural debate in the 1950s and 1960s.

### **SCA 1950s. The blooming**

The SCA cycle started in October 1950 with a meeting about the United Nations Headquarters in New York, which was published in the first issue of 1951. The subject of the gatherings was rather erratic, since they were not searching for any particular topic: *'More important than the criticized object is the critique itself because we are architects and 'our' critique will ultimately be 'our' way to express what we think about our profession'*. (Moya, 1951, p. 21)

Therefore, at the beginning the discussion was about a bit of everything and in a slightly chaotic way, but most of the meetings were dedicated to general topics. However, the first four sessions were organized about recent specific buildings. In addition to the first one about the UN Headquarters in New York, they discussed about the *Ministerio del Aire* by Luis Gutiérrez Soto, (Chueca Goitia, 1951) the greatest exponent of the Franco architecture in Madrid; about the Termini Station; (Aburto, 1951) and about the Sanctuaries of Aránzazu and La Merced, (Cabreró, 1951) two good examples of modern architecture designed by the young Francisco Javier Sáenz de Oíza. Even though the balance between foreign and Spanish cases was not equal, foreign presence in the 1950s SCAs was more or less frequent and it took one quarter of all the discussions.



**Figure 1.** First pages of the four starting SCAs, all of them devoted to buildings. From left to right, the UN Headquarters (RNA, (109), p. 21), the Ministerio del Aire (RNA, (112), p. 29), the Termini Station (RNA, (113), p. 29), and the Aránzazu and La Merced Sanctuaries (RNA, (114), p. 31).

However, it seems that only two countries really captured the attention of the Spanish. Except for the SCAs dedicated to the Italian Termini Station<sup>1</sup> and Brazilian architecture,<sup>2</sup> and the ones that reviewed the work of Alvar Aalto<sup>3</sup> and Le Corbusier,<sup>4</sup> the rest on foreign topics focused on two countries: Germany and the United States. Regarding Germany, two meetings were celebrated: a first one in 1956 on the 'Trends in German architecture',<sup>5</sup> and a second one on the occasion of the Berlin exhibition 'Interbau'. The US accumulated five meetings: the one already mentioned on the UN Headquarters and another one dedicated to the US

<sup>1</sup> Termini Station was opened in 1951, shortly before the SCA dedicated to it was celebrated.  
<sup>2</sup> This SCA was directly caused by the success of the travelling exhibition about Brazilian architecture photography that was shown in several Spanish cities in 1954. (Costa, Aburto, Fisac, & Chueca, 1954)  
<sup>3</sup> Alvar Aalto himself was the speaker of two of the sessions on the occasion of his visit to Spain in 1951. (Aalto, 1952)  
<sup>4</sup> In 1958, year in which the SCA about Le Corbusier was published, the Swiss master was concluding the *Unité d'habitation* in Berlin and had just built the Philips Pavilion in the Brussels International Exhibition, where the Spanish pavilion, designed by José Antonio Corrales and Ramón Vázquez Molezún, had been awarded the Gold Medal. (Moya, 1958)  
<sup>5</sup> It was celebrated due to the exhibition 'The German architecture today', held between the 18 and 31 May 1956 in the Exhibition Hall of the *Dirección General de Bellas Artes*. This SCA was not published in *RNA*.

Embassy in Madrid,<sup>6</sup> one about the organization of architecture offices in North America,<sup>7</sup> and two more about the traveling experiences to the United States of Fernando (Chueca Goitia, 1953) and a group of Spanish architects who travelled there in 1957. That very year there was a remarkable decrease in the celebration of the SCAs, which went from eight to two sessions, probably due to this last journey – in which Carlos de Miguel, *alma mater* of the meetings, participated – lasted for six weeks.

The following year, the SCAs practically returned to their previous frequency and reached six meetings, but then the trendline drastically dropped to the two SCAs celebrated in 1960. The last one, dedicated to the *Palacio de los Deportes* in Madrid, was not even published in the journal. This fall in the number of the meetings also matches the first years of *Arquitectura*, that recovered its original name in 1959 after having been reconstituted as the mouthpiece of the *Colegio Oficial de Arquitectos de Madrid*. Thus, it is not surprising that Carlos de Miguel, who continued in charge of the journal until 1973, did not have much time to organize the SCAs while he was adapting the publication to its new situation.

### **SCA 1960s. The reactivation**

Be that as it may, the pause lasted until 1963, when De Miguel sent a letter to the traditional attendees of the SCAs asking for help to recover them. According to the missive, there were a couple of problems that had to be solved. Firstly, the economic one, for which a 'small' individual contribution around 200 *pesetas*<sup>8</sup> was requested. He emphasized that most importantly was the interest in attending the

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<sup>6</sup>Both buildings were being finished at the time of the celebration of their respective SCAs. (Moya, 1955)

<sup>7</sup> We suppose that the reason to organize this SCA was the visit to Madrid of the American architect Robert Joseph 'Bob' Cantrel, who was in charge of an initial presentation that later was continued by Cayetano Cabanyes, a Madrid architect who had been working for some time with the AESB (Architects and Engineers of the Spanish Bases), a group of North American companies responsible for the construction of US military bases in Spain as a result of the Spain-USA cooperation treaty in 1953. (Viaje de estudios a Estados Unidos, 1957)

<sup>8</sup> This is equivalent to about 250 euros nowadays.

meetings, which may indicate that the progressive indifference of the participants was another reason for their extinction in the late 1950s.

In any case, the response was so positive that in June 1963 the SCAs resumed with two meetings dedicated to the *Casa de Campo*, a huge 1700-hectare public natural park located on West Madrid, which had remained largely undamaged because it had not been very frequently used. It seems that the establishment of a zoo within the park was being questioned. For that reason, they encouraged Eduardo Mangada, member of the editorial committee of the magazine and neighbour of the park, to prepare the opening lecture. This was followed by a lively discussion that the attendees quite enjoyed, one more reason for *Arquitectura* to dedicate the cover of the issue to this SCA.

Besides this, there are other facts that stand out and make us think that something had changed. For instance, in the presentation it was mentioned that a second cycle of sessions '*that, for several years, Carlos de Miguel had led*', was begun. (Mangada, 1963, p. 32) The use of the past tense seems to imply that De Miguel no longer had – or did not want to have – the relevant role that he kept during the first cycle. Furthermore, there is a noticeable change on the type of speakers. Barely 31 years old, Eduardo Mangada belonged to a generation after the one of the architects who were involved in the SCAs first period. But, the biggest differences between the new SCAs and the previous ones are the absolute absence of foreign topics and their regular focus on social or urban issues. In fact, many of the themes were directly taken from the pages of the national press and they usually invited speakers who were not architects. The city of Madrid would take an unusual importance to date. Eight of the twelve meetings held in this second period were dedicated to Madrid, its architects or its buildings.

Actually, the reasons for many of these changes go beyond the framework of the sessions and are directly connected to the political situation of the country, which had gone from a self-sufficient model in the 1940s to implement a developmental model in 1959. Thus, the 1960s were moments of great social changes. Spanish living standards improved, and a middle class that believed in its progress based on effort and personal work emerged. Hence, the architects' interests also

changed, especially those of younger architects, much more related to the social and urban issues that the new society was requiring.

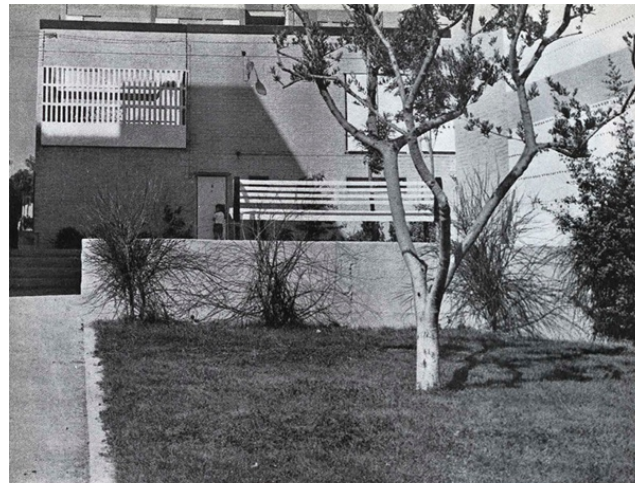
In the second SCA published in *Arquitectura*, the invited speaker was not an architect but Jesús Suevos, a Spanish journalist and Falangist politician with good relations with the Franco government. Suevos had been General Director of Broadcasting and Television and of Cinematography and Theatre and, at that time, he had just sworn in as First Deputy Mayor of Madrid, a post in which he would remain until three years after the death of Francisco Franco. Oddly, three years after Suevos that position would be occupied by Eduardo Mangada – the speaker of the SCA on the Casa de Campo –, who was appointed by the first Madrid socialist mayor of the Spanish transition: Enrique Tierno Galván. As can be seen, the speakers in this SCAs second period had a clearly marked political profile.

Suevos introduced quite effectively all the problems that he saw in the capital city and several architects apparently spoke after him, although this time *Arquitectura* did not publish their opinion. This may have been because, as said in the presentation, *'the discussion turned out to be quite messy'*. (Suevos, 1964, p. 2)

However, the SCA 'About Contemporary Architecture' is much more interesting for many reasons. In this case, the session arose from an article written by journalist Jesús (Casariego, 1964a) published in the newspaper *ABC*, in which, emphasising on the religious architecture of that period, he criticized the differences between the taste of modern architects and common people. In the SCA, Casariego made comparisons between what being a good or bad architect was, and then he expressed disagreement with the religious production of those days and advocated for an architecture *'with the aim of being eternal'*, meaning not *'just the physical appearance and robustness of the brick, but also the continuity in the style over time, which should be based on the well refined aesthetics standards'*. (Casariego, 1964b, p. 38)

As pointed out in the SCA introduction, the journalist conveyed *'in such a clear language that it prompted an exciting meeting'*. (Casariego, 1964b, p. 34) The first to participate was Luis Moya, one of the regular attendees from the early days and a member of the 'older generation', who tried to justify the absence of good

modern religious architecture in Spain with the economic and social downturn that came after the end of the war. His speech was more or less in agreement with that of Casariego.



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## S. C. A.

### SOBRE LA ARQUITECTURA ACTUAL

A raíz de un artículo publicado en el diario ABC firmado por el señor Casariego, se organizó en el Colegio de Arquitectos una nueva Sesión de Crítica.

Se envió con cierta antelación el texto del artículo a todos los arquitectos y se inició la sesión con la asistencia del autor del artículo, que, muy amablemente, se ofreció a actuar de ponente. En su conferencia, el señor Casariego expuso algunos de los puntos más interesantes de su artículo, expresándose en unos términos tan claros, que promovieron a continuación un coloquio muy movido.

En dicho coloquio tomaron parte varios arquitectos, y todas sus intervenciones provocaron un diálogo verdaderamente sugerente.

Habría sido deseo nuestro publicar todas ellas, pero ya que no es posible por falta de espacio, hemos considerado más oportuno publicar solamente algunas completas en lugar de un resumen de toda la Sesión.

Así, pues, presentamos, en directo, la ponencia del señor Casariego y las intervenciones de los arquitectos Luis Moya, Sáenz de Oiza, Barbero y Oriol, tomadas en cinta magnetofónica.

### INTRODUCCION PARA UN COLOQUIO CON LOS ARQUITECTOS

Señores arquitectos:

Sean, ante todo, mis primeras palabras para agradecer a vuestro compañero el señor De Miguel la amable invitación que hoy me trae a este Colegio y para agradecer a todos vuestra presencia. Y también para aclararos que vengo aquí como hombre

completamente profano en lo que la Arquitectura tiene de ciencia físico-matemática y de técnica constructiva. En la otra parte de vuestro quehacer, es decir, en la Arquitectura considerada como arte y representación de cultura y de historia, dispongo del voto, aunque sin mayor valor, al que todo hombre

**Figure 2.** First page of the SCA 'About Contemporary Architecture', published in (*Arquitectura*, (57), p. 32).

And now, Francisco Javier Sáenz de Oiza turned the conversation around. He was the oldest of the young generation, but also one of the clearest voices when expressing his view. Oiza started saying that he was in '*complete and total disagreement with the speaker*'. Then, he addressed Casariego stating that '*some people do not live for the moment, they fall behind and then they find everything strange... There's nothing we can do about it! I really feel sorry for them*'. The speaker tried to defend himself alleging that '*ancient or modern*' did not exist, but



rather '*beautiful or not beautiful*'. Oíza replied with a question: '*Who sets beauty standards?*' (Casariego, 1964b, p. 42) The discussion was rather lively until Manuel Barbero took the floor to ask society to look upon a building with the same good faith as an architect. When it seemed that the situation had calmed down, Miguel de Oriol stirred again the debate. He was one of the youngest and had just come back to Spain after finishing his studies in Urban Planning at Yale University.

I personally believe that there has never been a clearest moment in the world [...] In all likelihood, no earlier time has been so clear [...] Any architecture [...] is better than any other previous architecture. It is a nonsense saying: everything that has been done is wrong. [...] And this is what current criticism is doing. (Casariego, 1964b, p. 44)

Sáenz de Oíza concluded Oriol's intervention claiming: '*the role of criticism in Spanish press is teaching people more. I prefer being an illiterate rather than being deceived!*'. Thus, the session ended up with significant disagreements and differences between the speaker –supported by the older attendees– and the architects of the young generation, completely convinced of the adequacy of the architecture they were proposing.

It is not known if this kind of controversy was the reason not to publish more SCAs until three years later. These new meetings were indeed very much different. But they have one thing in common: all of three were devoted to Madrid. The first one was a speech by the writer Camilo José Cela about '*Madrid, the architects and chance*', and the other two were debates about examples of good quality architecture in Madrid: *El Viso* neighbourhood, built during the Republican period, and the *Giraso!* building, which had recently been inaugurated. Both examples were introduced by its architects, Rafael Bergamín and Juan Antonio Coderch, respectively.

The subject matters and discussions of these SCAs were not as interesting as other issues that must be highlighted. As can be seen, it was common practice to invite speakers who were not architects to discuss issues related to Madrid, that is to say, architects were interested in finding out more about civil society voice. As Pedro Casariego said in the symposium which followed Cela's lecture, the

training of architects 'is necessarily complex and must be supplemented by what people say from outside'. (Cela, 1967, p. 51) Rafael Bergamín, who had to go into exile in Venezuela for being a supporter of the II Republic, had been able to come back to Spain in 1959. Eight years after, he was a speaker in a SCA about one of the most representative works of the republican period. (Bergamín, 1967) This was an extraordinary situation, unheard of to date. Besides, a woman, Carmen Castro, participated in the subsequent debate. She was a journalist who collaborated in the journal *Arquitectura* since 1960 writing the section 'What we use'.

However, the third SCA – the one dedicated to the *Girasol* building – deserves to be highlighted. After very flattering commentary from different art and architecture critics, Sáenz de Oíza addressed the participants in his constant critical tone.

Having lost the charm of the first SCAs really upsets me. Those were entirely informal, without precaution of any kind, and different architectural issues were discussed trying to find truth. I would like to come back to that genuine nature of those sessions, where we all spoke bluntly and clearly. (Coderch, 1967, p. 33)

It seems that this was actually one of the factors of the SCAs decline. Juan Daniel Fullaondo had a particularly important role in the ones held in 1968, since he participated as a speaker in two meetings. At that time, the young Fullaondo was the head of the journal *Nueva Forma*, which was responsible for an important change of the critical scenario of Spanish architecture. The first session should have been dedicated to a Fullaondo's design in Madrid, a store for *H Muebles*. Nevertheless, he decided not only to talk about the project, but also about the phenomenon of stores in cities in general, before focusing on the *H Muebles* store. This was followed by a vigorous and heated debate in which some present and absent people were criticized. Thus, at one point, Miguel de Oriol claimed: 'I think that everything which has been said in this conversation [...] is destructive [...] everyone attacking each other'. (Fullaondo, 1968b, p. 33)



**Figure 3.** SCA celebrated in the H Muebles store in 1968. Front to back, Carlos de Miguel, Juan Daniel Fullaondo, Rafael Moneo, and José Antonio Corrales. (Carlos de Miguel Archive. ETSAM Library, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid).

Despite all the criticism made, Fullaondo did not withhold from raising fierce controversy and he proposed a reflection on both Madrid and Barcelona Architecture Schools, each one with its own contribution. This idea could be found in several Spanish and foreign publications, where contemporary Spanish architecture of the time had been reviewed, as for instance, the text written by Antonio (Fernández Alba, 1964) for the monographic issue of *Arquitectura* devoted to 'Spanish Architecture, 1939-1964', or several articles of the monographic issue *Zodiac* 15, where Oriol Bohigas said:

The current characteristics are, however, quite different in Madrid and Barcelona. Castilian architecture revealed cautious optimism and trust in the prestige of the fascist style. By contrast, Catalan architecture remains in a pessimistic and retracted position, more archaeological [...]. (Bohigas & Flores, 1965, p. 32)



**Figure 4.** Invitation card for the SCA on the duality Madrid-Barcelona, 1967. (Carlos de Miguel Archive. ETSAM Library, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid).

In that issue, Ricardo Bofill insisted on Spanish architecture divided into Madrid and Barcelona, although he added a third region, coastal tourist areas, which he considered '*the Spain where the professionals worked*'. (Bofill, 1965, p. 40) Juan Daniel (Fullaondo, 1967) had also written about the duality Madrid-Barcelona in a recent work about Antonio Fernández Alba's architecture. But the text that Alexandre Cirici-Pellicer had written for the book *Arquitectura española contemporánea* (Domènech Girbau, 1968) was the real trigger for that session. Fullaondo (1968a, p. 11) expounded that '*an attempt of critical enunciation about architectural projects in Madrid and Barcelona was noticed*' in that text. In his opinion, both cases seemed to be defined '*by respective features of idealism and realism*'. Fullaondo did not see in Madrid that rationalism suggested by Cirici, but

rather an *'invertebrate movement'* that found its deepest meaning in its own invertebrate condition. As Fullaondo (1968a, p. 23) believed, Madrid School *'had written the most important chapter of thirty years of Spanish Architecture'*. The Catalan architect and critic Oriol (Bohigas, 1968) replied arguing the consistent style that he found in Catalan architecture and which has lasted for ages.



**Figure 5.** Several architects who attended the SCA celebrated in Mojácar (Almería) in 1971. From left to right, Fernando Higuera, Francisco Javier Sáenz de Oíza, and Ricardo Bofill. (Carlos de Miguel Archive. ETSAM Library, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid).

The last two published SCAs are quite unusual. According to the introduction of the first one, devoted to the planning of the Plaza de Colón in Madrid, *'for a variety of reasons, the session did not achieve its goal'*. (Insistamos en la Plaza de Colón, 1971, p. 37) Thus, several opinions were published, but not the result of the session itself. The second one, although named SCA in the journal, is a compilation of different conversations of a group of architects on a trip to Almería. The

interventions are so diverse that final conclusions were written by the editor of the journal – the young Juan Orge Cano – and they consisted merely in a critical analysis of the status of the region. (Conversaciones en Mojácar, 1971)

All in all, in addition to a decrease in the number of meetings, those which were held were really far from the initial aim of the sessions. Although it seemed that Carlos de Miguel was going to pass on the baton of the organization, he continued at the head during the second period. Either way, at the beginning of the 1970s he was already thinking of retirement and it is likely that he had less motivation. Overall, disagreements and differences of approach and interests between the two generations became evident and some of the sessions resulted in personal criticism of certain architects. The chances are that there was not just one reason for the end of the sessions, but a combination of circumstances which led to its dissolution after twenty years down the track. But this dissolution was also part of an internal crisis of the journal.

Got lost in the need to consider current issues, as social criticism from a technical point of view, many of its pages are about urban planning riddled with sociology and other external fields, or the impossible prefabrication [...]

Not far from the internal crisis of the journal *Arquitectura* is the appearance of the journal *Nueva Forma* in 1966. Headed by J. D. Fullaondo, it assumed as own the sophisticated organic experience of its director and satisfied the historiographical curiosity for the previous international architecture, much appreciated at that moment. (Frechilla, 1984, p. 9)

## **Conclusion**

Whatever the case, the SCAs of the second period were very different from the first ones. Under a very different political reality, with a Franco Government much more open to the world and very less control of the media, the journal *Arquitectura* introduced new issues to meet the interests of the new middle class, and not so those of the ruling administration. The urban planning for society was one of the

most important subject matters and many analysis and reviews focused on Madrid, since the journal no longer had a national status, but became the mouthpiece of its institute of architects. *Arquitectura* not only lost its national status but its international one, at least when related to SCAs. It seems that the maturity achieved by Spanish Architecture made them think that foreign models were not necessary, neither for the design nor the critique. Several international debates published by other European journals were reproduced in *Arquitectura* at the beginning of the 1960s, but it is also true that discussions usually focused in the case of Spain at the end of that decade. Besides, the few sections on international architecture gradually disappeared to be replaced by new topics.

In all likelihood, the group of new collaborators who joined the editorial board were a great influence. They were younger than those 'heroic' architects who brought back the modernity which was lost during the dictatorship. This group was educated during the 1950s and the way they could interact with other countries was very different. They grew up close to the world and felt that they belonged to it, so they did not look for foreign references, as these were part of their own culture. In that sense, they differed significantly from the older architects, who continued deeply entrenched in a modernity which brought them out of the abyss, a modernity which at that time – in the decade of 1970 – had already been vilified because of its formalism and lack of life.

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