

Moving between sculpture, architecture, and urban design, Jorge Oteiza developed an ascetic and transcendent conception of space and its boundaries, articulated through his concept of *desocupación*.

## Jorge Oteiza's 'de-occupation': towards an ascetic space in Spanish modern architecture (1948–60)

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The work and thought of the Basque sculptor Jorge Oteiza (b. Orio, 1908 – d. San Sebastian, 2003) is an omnipresent reference point in the historiography of modern Spanish architecture. Since the Jorge Oteiza Museum Foundation was opened shortly after his death, a great number of studies have been published about him, mainly in Spanish and Basque. Oteiza's artistic career was closely connected to the postwar Spanish architectural scene. During the 1950s, he participated in numerous projects and architecture competitions and published his work in specialised journals and magazines in the field. Spain was at that time under the regime of General Franco and, as a consequence of the Civil War (1936–9), the country was suffering an economic crisis that affected culture, art, and architecture.

The decade of the 1950s saw an intensive development of Oteiza's sculptural work and thinking – a period when he collaborated with architects on several projects. This line of work had a clear inflection point in 1957, the year he received the Gran Premio in the VI Biennial of São Paulo. From that point onwards his research began to move towards a conclusion in his eventual abandonment of sculpture in 1960. His interest then widened to other fields and disciplines, in which the 'meaning of the work of art became, again, a campaigning weapon, now more social than cultural as in the early 1950s'.<sup>1</sup>

From 1957, in his theoretical and artistic work, Oteiza proposed the concept of '*desocupación*' – a complex concept that we translate here as 'de-occupation' – as a way of approaching any work of art, whether a sculpture or a work of architecture. For those architects that worked with him or published articles in architecture journals about his art and thought, this approach to art was revelatory.<sup>2</sup>

This article firstly presents how the work of Oteiza was understood in the Spanish architecture culture scenario. In this context, the architecture and art journal *Nueva Forma* stands out. His main director, the architect Juan Daniel Fullaondo, was responsible for publishing several articles, presenting Oteiza's work and giving emphasis to his collaborations with

architects, defining some projects as especially significant in understanding Oteiza's approach to architecture. These articles were compiled and published as a book in 1968, with the title *Oteiza 1933–1968*. The book was the first monograph dedicated to Oteiza's artistic and architectural career. The fact that this book was edited by an architect and published by an architectural publishing house is a clear demonstration of the great interest that his work and thinking aroused in Spanish architects. Secondly, the paper seeks to express in simple language what Oteiza meant by 'de-occupation', mainly following Pedro Manterola's ideas, which explain that Oteiza's sculpture could be defined as 'ascetic' – as a path to moral and spiritual perfection. Finally, the article explains how Manterola's ideas can also be applied to Oteiza's architecture, an idea that drives us to understand architectural space also as ascetic.

Exhaustive research has been done in the archives of the Oteiza Museum Foundation to carry out this work. The Museum Foundation provided access to original manuscripts and correspondence of Jorge Oteiza, as well as access to his personal library, where it was possible to consult the comments and marginal annotations that the sculptor wrote down at the time he was reading the books, journals, and magazines commented on in this text.

### A brief approach to Oteiza's work and life

Jorge Oteiza was born in 1908 in Orio (Basque Country, Spain). His artistic schooling was essentially self-taught, and his career was marked by a period of living in Latin America. In the years before 1935, he had some experience with architecture after a failed attempt to study the discipline. In spite of not obtaining qualifications, he began his artistic training essentially between Madrid and the Basque Country. In the early years of the 1930s, Oteiza became acquainted with the artistic and architectural milieu created by the architects José Manuel Aizpurúa and Joaquín Labayen in San Sebastian, strongly influenced by the artistic avant garde in Central Europe.<sup>3</sup> In 1935, Oteiza left for Buenos Aires intending to explore

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new horizons, but without realising that his departure from Spain would last until 1948, following the eruption of the Spanish Civil War in 1936.<sup>4</sup>

During his Latin American sojourn, Oteiza continued to study the art of the Central European avant garde and dedicated a significant part of his time to his education and research, travelling and reading about the philosophy and criticism of art.<sup>5</sup> His sculptural output was little, but not his theoretical work. Oteiza published various articles in specialised journals, where he introduced the concept of *trasestatua*, a prelude to what he would later define as ‘de-occupation’: ‘[...] The empty space shall constitute the movement from the traditional statue-mass to the statue-energy of the future, from the heavy and closed statue to the super light and open statue, the *trasestatua*’.<sup>6</sup> As the studies of Echeverría Plazaola explain, in these texts Oteiza reveals his interest in the work of Malevich, who generates space with a minimal selection of elements. This would form the basis of Oteiza’s future investigations.<sup>7</sup>

On his return to Spain in 1948, Oteiza laid down the foundations of his career as a sculptor. His artistic work evolved from figurative sculpture towards abstraction, gradually divesting the initial primitivism inspired by his Latin American sojourn, to achieve a form of abstraction close to concrete art. In these ten years of intense production of sculptures, Oteiza collaborated actively in collective exhibitions, seminars and art conferences, published articles in specialised journals and books, and also contributed to architecture projects.<sup>8</sup> During those years, when the cultural climate in Spain was deeply influenced by the economic depression of the first decade after the end of the Spanish Civil War, Oteiza became a staunch defender of abstraction and the ‘new art’ as the appropriate art for the time.<sup>9</sup> He also defended it as art that ought to represent the religious Catholic values espoused by the Franco Regime, a key factor for his collaborators in the domain of architecture.

Oteiza’s greatest international success came in 1957 when he was awarded the Gran Premio at the VI Biennial of sculpture in São Paulo. He presented twenty-eight sculptures in the competition in ten arrangements, which he referred to as ‘neo-concrete sculptures’, an argument in favour of ‘new art’ conceived as the evolution of the constructivist legacy from the beginning of the twentieth century, and which he accompanied with the essay ‘Propósito experimental 1956–1957 [Experimental proposal 1956–1957]’.<sup>10</sup> In this text – an essential essay for

understanding Oteiza’s work – the sculptor wrote about the steps he thought his sculpture was taking, or, as he titled it, his ‘laboratory of art’. The argument sets out his disagreement with the ideas of Kandinsky and Mondrian, which ultimately led him to identify himself as someone who was continuing the work of Malevich. This important text also defines ‘de-occupation’ as the omnipresent concept in his artistic *oeuvre*. Confronted with forms that occupy a space, which the viewer, as a secondary element, views from outside, Oteiza proposes instead forms that define a space as absolutely secondary, a statue that is empty and emptied. This means emptying the space of formal elements to include the person within it.<sup>11</sup>

Oteiza’s approach to space was especially interesting for architects. In parallel with the development of his sculpture in the 1950’s, Oteiza collaborated actively with several Spanish architects on various projects with various degrees of involvement [Table 1].<sup>12</sup>

Several of these collaborations with architects were the subject of articles in specialised journals on architecture, especially in the journal for the Institute of Madrilenian Architects (*Colegio Oficial de Arquitectos de Madrid, COAM*) – RNA later changed to *Arquitectura* – and the journal *Nueva Forma*, which enabled professionals in the field, over an extended period, to become aware of his work and thought. Some of these articles featured the reproduction of images and their description, and the debate around the opposition between the figurative and the abstract in the area of sculpture.<sup>13</sup>

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At the end of the 1960s, when a new generation of architects began to debate the value of Oteiza’s work and thought, new critical reflections stimulated a vigorous debate on the sculptor’s contribution to the recent history of Spanish architecture. In 1968, the architectural publishing house *Nueva Forma* published the book *Oteiza 1933–68*, a text that republished six instalments from the architecture and art journal *Forma Nueva-el Inmueble* between March and August 1967.<sup>14</sup> These instalments collected several essays of Oteiza that are relevant to understand his thought, together with various critical writings involving the participation of the architect Rafael Moneo and the art critic Ángel Crespo.<sup>15</sup> The journal also published more than a hundred images of Oteiza’s sculptural and

Sculpture by Oteiza	Building	City/Place	Year	Architects
Felipe IV Monument	18 July Square	San Sebastian	1949	José Maria Ruiz Aizpiri
'Four Evangelists'	Zadorra Hermitage	Río Zadorra	1949	José Torán (engineer)
'Essay on the simultaneous	Spanish Pavilion at the IX Milan Triennial	Milano	1951	José Antonio Coderch
'Prometheus, The Unknown Political Prisoner'	Competition for an urban place		1952	No
Reception desk 'Itaka'	Optica Cottet	Madrid	1953	Manuel Jaén
Reception desk, two sculptures and shield	Chamber of Commerce	Cordoba	1954	Rafael de La-Hoz and José María García de Paredes
Door handle of entrance, desk and chair (unconfirmed)	Shop Studio 52	Cordoba	1954	Rafael de La-Hoz
Facade	Sanctuary of Arantzazu	Oñate	1955	Francisco Javier Sáenz de Oiza, Luís Laorga
'Santo Domingo' and 'Two monks'	Church of the Dominican Apostolic College	Valladolid	1954	Miguel Fisac
Mural reliefs	Chapel on the Road of Santiago	Castilla	1955	Francisco Javier Sáenz de Oiza and Luis Romani
Facade relief	Institute of Livestock Artificial Insemination	Madrid	1955	Mariano Garrigues Díaz-Cañabate
Mural reliefs and sundial	Laboral University	Tarragona	1956	Manuel Sierra Nava, Antonio de la Vega, Luis Peral Buesa, Antonio Pujol
Mural relief	Gate building in America Avenue	Madrid	1956	No
Relief 'Elias and his chariot of fire'	Dwelling	Madrid	1956	No
Relief 'Homage to Bach'	Dwelling	Madrid	1956	No
Relief 'Slow Forms'	Desk	Madrid	1957	No
Exhibition display	IV Biennial Exhibition Sao Paulo	Sao Paulo	1957	No
Stele and Chapel	Monument Padre Donostia	Aguiña	1957	Luis Vallet
Exhibition design	Interior Spanish Pavilion	Brussels	1958	José Antonio Corrales and Ramón Vázquez Molezún with an interdisciplinary team
Relief lower floor	Houses Oteiza and Basterrechea	Irun	1958	Luis Vallet
Frieze and facade wall lamps	Hotel Fenix	Madrid	1958	No
Facade relief	Babcock building		1958	Álvaro Libano
Relief 'Suit con paisaje de Aguiña'	Hall of the Banco Guipuzcoano	San Sebastian	1959	No
No sculpture	José Batlle Monument	Montevideo	1959	Roberto Puig

Table 1: Sculpture projects of Jorge Oteiza undertaken to form part of architectural or urban spaces (1948–60)

architectural work that marked out the Chapel of the Camino de Santiago (1955) and José Batlle's Monument in Montevideo (1959) as Oteiza's most relevant architectural collaborations.<sup>16</sup>

This book, the first monograph about Oteiza, was edited by Juan Daniel Fullaondo, one of the most relevant critics of architecture of that time in Spain, and part of the journal's editorial team. The book was initially censored by the Franco Regime, but eventually three hundred and forty-seven copies were published.<sup>17</sup> Fullaondo's text reveals a certain

irritation at the scant attention given to the work and, more particularly, the thought of Oteiza, during the previous decade (the 1950s), when he was producing most of his works of sculpture and architecture. Notably, Fullaondo wrote:

*The date he was awarded the Gran Premio is a good starting point to begin the abovementioned study and revision. I say this, because in his personal catalogue 1957 Biennial, Oteiza published an important text that transcends the strict boundaries of sculpture and, in our opinion, during this moment of artistic crisis that we*

*are experiencing, is even more relevant now than when he wrote it. That is why, we are pleased to re-publish it in our pages.*<sup>18</sup>

Thus, the book was an attempt to present a series of reflections on Oteiza's historical and aesthetic relevance, as a sculptor and architect.

Rafael Moneo described Oteiza's contribution to architecture as something 'apart from the whole architecture scene [of the time], different in its concept of space, its understanding of surface, its idea of the history of society'. Moneo pointed out that Oteiza raised the possibility of doing without the established language of architecture, of the entire set of conventions, to give form to a new idea.<sup>19</sup> He continued: 'Oteiza is a type of artist like Mondrian, van Doesburg, Kandinsky, for whom the new world that they sensed, and that was beginning to take shape, had to be, above all, a new form.'<sup>20</sup> However, he did not suggest that Oteiza's work was just a formal reflection, but the contrary. He considered that Oteiza's contribution to architecture went further than actual debates on form or style, whether in sculpture or architecture, presenting it as an 'ethical' position and stating: 'if the formal world of Oteiza does not impress us, perhaps what happens is that we do not understand it, or we do not want to understand the new world that lies latent within it.'<sup>21</sup> This critique was published in 1967, a little after Moneo published his well-known article 'A la conquista de lo irracional' ('In search of the irrational'), in which he questioned the evolution of modern language in the work of architects like Paul Rudolph or the Passarelli studio, whom he considered examples of 'faith in the expressive possibilities of a known formal world'.<sup>22</sup>

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Juan Daniel Fullaondo also wrote two articles in which he concurred with Moneo, noting that Oteiza's approach diverged from contemporary currents, such as in the brutalist tendencies in architecture or informalism in painting, where expression dominated the work (see the work of Tapiés or Feito in Spain's case).<sup>23</sup> He centred his arguments on the idea of a 'crisis' in the language of modern architecture, a critical angle that was particularly influenced by the thought of Bruno Zevi and his personal criticism of functionalism and its architectural language, which, in Zevi's opinion, was evolving in the situation that lacked creative liberty.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, Ángel Crespo wrote an essay in which he highlighted the inter-disciplinary nature of Oteiza's work, an aspect that he linked to his understanding of art and architecture as non-autonomous disciplines and, therefore, relating it to the search for integration with arts related to modern architecture.<sup>25</sup> Crespo titled his article 'Jorge

(de) Oteiza, humanist', with the intention of emphasising how Oteiza did not share the idea that artistic disciplines existed autonomously but exactly the opposite, as his sculptural and architectural work formed part of the same creative process in which the boundaries between disciplines were completely erased.

The criticism expressed in these essays supported the idea that Oteiza's work succeeded in avoiding the repetition of what they considered 'run-down ideas', and that his work was a reflection of a singular even exemplary path. They understood Oteiza as a connoisseur of the past, of figurative, constructivist, and primitive languages, but they also applauded his boldness for forging his own path, defining 'de-occupation' as a concept that guided his work through understanding the creative process as a means to spiritual transcendence through that artistic exercise, as Crepo's humanist label proposed.

### Defining 'de-occupation'

As regards the development of Oteiza's sculptural work, various texts have been published, notably those by Soledad Álvarez, Ángel Badós, Pedro Manterola, and Txomin Badiola.<sup>26</sup> These works all explore the concept of 'de-occupation' in depth and its importance for Oteiza's sculptures. For example, Bados in presenting his classified organisation of Oteiza's work uses the concept of 'de-occupation' as a thread for his analysis of how the concept evolved in his work. He states:

*I realised that the concept of de-occupation of mass runs through the 'Experimental Proposal', as if Oteiza knew that the way sculpture contributes to the transformation of reality is through a structured activity capable of altering all our critical and perceptive mechanisms.*<sup>27</sup>

In contrast, Pedro Manterola's studies consider that it is necessary to introduce a mystical perspective to understand Oteiza's career development and the evolution of the concept of 'de-occupation'.

Manterola identifies three successive periods in the development of the concept of 'de-occupation'. In the first period, the concept is understood as 'emptying': the physical subtraction from the mass, the act of taking away from a material block that which is not required to create the sculpture – similar to what Michaelangelo did in the sixteenth century. In this regard, Materola and other critics agree that the *Friso de los Apóstoles* (1953) in the *Sanctuary of Arantzazu* is one of the most relevant examples. Concerning the second period, Oteiza wrote in his Sao Paulo 'Experimental Proposition' (1956–7), the 'de-occupation' is created by the fusion of light formal units. In this period, Oteiza develops an interest in working with a more systematic approach, incorporating a methodology inspired by science into his creative process. As Manterola states, 'the inclination of the metaphysical spirit to seek the shelter of science is clear, as Bergson argues in *The Creative Mind*'.<sup>28</sup> Thus, previously defined geometric units, called 'Malevich units' would form the basis of his exploration and the language of de-occupation, leaving behind the previous figurative phase to

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embrace geometric abstraction, and giving rise to a series of sculptures such as the *Desocupación de la esfera* [De-occupation of the Sphere] (1957), the *Estudios a partir del par móvil* [Studies on a Moving Couple] (1956–8), or *Homenaje a Mallarmé* [Homage to Mallarmé] (1985).<sup>29</sup> Lastly, in a third period, the sculpture is made from the void, as in his *Cajas metafísicas* [Metaphysical Boxes] (1958–9). Here the void obtained from the de-occupation is conceived as a metaphysical material that finally manifests and reveals clearly Oteiza’s spiritual sensibility.<sup>30</sup> As Manterola states, the ‘Metaphysical boxes’ are not just abstract sculptures formed from metal sheets but, ‘place-box[es] where sculpture, the vacant space, the spiritual, is revealed. A house for the spirit.’<sup>31</sup>

Oteiza’s thought can seem paradoxical, considering that many of his aesthetic references were far removed from the world of religious devotion. Nevertheless, Oteiza considered art and sculpture as ‘ascetic’ – as a path to moral and spiritual perfection.<sup>32</sup> This idea is supported by Manterola writings (which build on the previous suggestion of Crespo who defined Oteiza’s as a humanist), which emphasise his determined search for spiritual perfection through religious belief. At heart, Oteiza could be considered a radically anti-modern artist, if ‘modern’ is understood as the result of the secularisation process that accompanied the various artistic movements begotten at the end of the nineteenth and turn of the twentieth centuries. As Manterola states ‘the historical-logical dressing for [Oteiza’s] discourse, served no other purpose than to justify art’s *raison d’être* as an instrument to re-sacralise the world’.<sup>33</sup>

It is possible to comprehend how Oteiza’s concept of ‘de-occupation’ was transferred to architectural and urban space, by following these three phases described by Manterola. Before 1955, the majority of Oteiza’s sculptures made for architectural projects were incorporated into the interiors and facades of buildings. Those sculptures are directly connected with ‘emptying’, Manterola’s first phase idea of de-occupation. The awarded Chapel on the Road of Santiago (1955) done in collaboration with the architect Francisco Javier Sáenz de Oíza, can be framed through Manterola’s second phase understanding of de-occupation,<sup>34</sup> while José Batlle’s Monument in Montevideo (1959), the other Oteiza’s work highlighted in those journals, should be placed in the third Manterola’s phase, which best represents Oteiza’s ascetic approach to architectural and urban space.

## Phase 1

Subtraction and deformation of mass in sculpture and its overlap into architecture

Francisco Javier Sáenz de Oíza and Luís Laorga were the architects commissioned for the design of the Sanctuary at Arantzazu.<sup>35</sup> They worked on the design and composition of the facade together with Oteiza. In the historiography of Spanish architecture, this project is considered representative of the willingness of artists and architects to incorporate abstraction into buildings of a religious character.

Oteiza’s group of sculpture for the facade of this sanctuary were positioned in such a way as to look out towards the landscape while enhancing the building.<sup>36</sup> After various versions, the facade was resolved with a frieze of fourteen figures representing the apostles – which created some controversy within the Church. A wall flanked by two towers supported Oteiza’s reliefs, and a sculpture of the Virgin was added to preside from above. The works of sculpture are formed by extraction and deformation of the mass, as Manterola states, and interact with the architectural composition with the aim of creating a complete religious space for the community.<sup>37</sup> The Sanctuary of Arantzazu was thus converted into ‘the proclamation of an aesthetic, political, and religious dream based on the dual and inseparable idea of community of sacrifice’ – in this case, the sacrifice of mass in the hands of the sculptor and, at the same time, the sacrifice of the sculpture itself at the spiritual service of architecture.<sup>38</sup>

In the Córdoba Chamber of Commerce (1954), a work developed in parallel to the Sanctuary of Arantzazu, this sense of religion and community was not so evident, yet the interaction of Oteiza’s work of sculpture with the architectural space in which it is inserted is of great interest, especially on the ground floor.<sup>39</sup> The architects García Paredes and La-Hoz designed an organic space understood as a total work of art, a decision in harmony with the ideas of the Italian critic Bruno Zevi, one of the most widely read at that time in Spain, and who certainly influenced Oteiza. The building’s interior was defined through three pieces of sculpture – the reception counter and two sculptures – linked formally and materially to create an interior space with a defined composition.

## Phase 2

Minimal formal units and the creation of architectural space

At the end of 1954, Oteiza’s work on the Sanctuary of Arantzazu was coming to an end. At that moment, Oteiza took part in a competition for the Chapel on the Road of Santiago together with the architects Francisco Javier Sáenz de Oíza, with whom he had worked at Arantzazu, and Luis Romaní. Unfortunately, the project was never built.<sup>40</sup>

Studies by Francisco Javier Sáenz Guerra (son of Sáenz de Oíza), testify that the authors brought various artistic and architectural references to the project, which combined together in the final work.<sup>41</sup> Oíza contributed references to the architecture of Mies van der Rohe and proposed the idea of

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constructing a three-dimensional grid lifted up from the floor plan. Oteiza added to this idea a proposal to define the interior of the Chapel using three walls of different lengths, independent from the three-dimensional roof structure. Sáenz Guerra concludes that Romaní mediated between the strong personalities of the other two and made many of the drawings for the project. The most notable of these is a ‘Collage’ of the Chapel, which as the years passed, became one of the most iconic images used to explain how Spanish architecture decided to embrace modern architecture. However, this was not secular modern architecture like the new architecture that aped the Central European avant garde, but a re-sacralised modern architecture.

The competition became a plea in defence of rationalism as the architectural language for the *zeitgeist* and at the same time a model of how architecture could represent the prevailing Catholic values in Franco’s Spain, both suited to the modern age and distancing itself from the processes of post-Enlightenment secularisation.<sup>42</sup> A little more than a decade later, the Spanish critics saw the project as ‘the best and most fitting swansong for Spanish rationalism’.<sup>43</sup>

In developing the idea of the project, Oteiza made some sculptural reliefs for four of the walls’ planes, three intended for the exterior walls and one for an interior wall. From a sculptural perspective, these reliefs did not entail any advance in the concept of de-occupation but were more a further iteration of ideas informing the reliefs already created for the facade of the Sanctuary at Arantzazu. Nevertheless, architecturally, these three walls – three elemental units – were formed in such a way as to generate a space of welcome for the pilgrim under the metal roof structure, a space with an important symbolic and religious weight and a transcendental purpose. The space might be considered as a precursor of the third phase of ‘de-occupation’: a work with minimal formal units loaded with transcendence. However, at this time, Oteiza did not describe them as such.

After the competition, Oteiza designed a series of works for walls, both for the facades of various buildings and interior spaces. These mural sculptures were thought out gradually, like the transition from a solid wall to a wall with spatial possibilities, defined by minimal forms and the play of natural light.<sup>44</sup> The defining step was the artistic experiment of the *Light Wall* (1956). This work was made out of glass models that referenced the Suprematist paintings of Malévich to create light and colour effects, the overlapping of various glass sheets – planes or curves – on which were interlaced shards of different colours and shapes that were in turn

illuminated in different ways generating a variety of spatial situations. Oteiza called these works ‘Malévich Units’. Their creation was a definitive step towards ‘de-occupation’.

### Phase 3

#### Metaphysical boxes and architectural ‘de-occupation’

In the text *Experimental Proposition* [*Propósito Experimental*, 1956–7] reprinted in the journal *Forma Nueva-el inmueble*, and originally published in the catalogue of the São Paulo IV Biennial, Oteiza stated:

*Today, I focus all my interest, on more than the functional integration of the Statue with the architecture and the world - which is the ornamental and technical aspects that everyone has mastered best - to the final determination of the work as a metaphysical service to mankind. Just as a place in itself, spiritual, for the viewer’s soul. Therefore, I can now say, that my abstract sculpture is religious art. That which is born aesthetically as de-occupation of space, as liberty, is transcendent as a place that lies beyond death.*<sup>45</sup>

From this point onwards, Oteiza begins to work with ‘de-occupation’ as a creative end, and his architectural proposals will reflect this. As Fullaondo noted, the architectural project that stands out in this regard after São Paulo is the Monument to José Batlle in Montevideo, created in collaboration with the architect Roberto Puig.<sup>46</sup>

‘De-occupation’ is identified here as a metaphysical empty space, which for the person experiencing it, has both a physical and spiritual resonance. In addition, importantly from an architectural perspective, there is a clear interest in linking this concept with the configuration of urban space. In 1958, Oteiza gave a lecture entitled, ‘The City as Work of Art’. In it he expressed his conviction

*that architecture and the city participate in the same environment as the work of art [having] in common the fact that they are intimately related to human needs that they try and satisfy.*<sup>47</sup>

As is characteristic of his thought, Oteiza understands this ‘human necessity’ transcendently, and translates it to every conceivable scale, from sculpture to urban design.

Oteiza and Puig’s proposal is composed of three parts that respond to cultural requirements (library, study centre, auditorium, etc.) and create an urban space, a gift to the city. They form a white horizontal prism located on top of a hill, a location defined in the competition’s specification. This prism, 54 m x 18 m x 12 m, rises from the ground creating a glass entrance at ground floor level. The building is lit from above, through a continuous system of skylights, and the walls are enclosed in concrete panels worked with mason’s bush hammer on both sides. The prism’s metal superstructure is only

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visible from the inside; therefore, the whole can be understood as a giant elevated beam, open to the sky and the light, but silent and closed to the outside. In the project summary report, the authors state that 'with the rectangular prism we want to commit to not express ourselves with the architecture that we have to reduce and silence'.<sup>48</sup> The project is completed with two more elements: a reinforced concrete wall 1.5 m high and 30 cm thick, white, and worked with bush hammers like the external walls of the main prism, and a 54 m sided concrete square, made from black limestone, situated on the lower part of the hill. The white wall firstly acts as a protection against the steep slope of the hill extending it towards the black square and acquiring its final length of 63 m. The black square also acts as an imprint of the main sculpture, a trace of the metaphysical void generated.<sup>49</sup>

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In their report for the Monument to Batlle, Oteiza and Puig referred to the ideas of Giedion, Sert, and Leger about the search for a new monumentality. They concurred with them as regards the growing degradation of the symbolic capacity of works of architecture having pseudo monumentality, devalued symbols, disconnected from the society they were representing. In their writings, the three authors proposed the generation of urban spaces for the community, where community centres could be located and where collective life might develop and monumental buildings would be located. Oteiza and Puig agreed partly with this vision, since, for Oteiza, the idea of the monumental was not about constructing new buildings but resided in urban space itself as de-occupation, as a metaphysical void. In the same way as with his final sculptures, the idea of a square black hole on the hill, bordered by a white wall worked with bush hammers was a manifestation of the monumental character – as something re-sacralised – that the new urban public space ought to acquire.

*We understand the monumental creation as the open boundary to a great empty space, a place of reception in the dynamic and turbulent city that attempts to isolate the community's vital essence, translating it into existential reason, a space from whose intimacy the new political and spiritual conscience of man is remade.*<sup>50</sup>

[...]

*We can affirm today that man before the statue, the community before the new concept of the monumental, has to recover this participation in religious intimacy in the aesthetic awareness of space.*<sup>51</sup>

Entirely in keeping with this approach, and in contrast to Oteiza's career up until this moment, in this collaboration between sculptor and architect, no sculpture was made. For Oteiza the perfect integration of sculpture and architecture happens

when the space created no longer needed any object to be added because both aesthetically and spiritually the sculpture is the creation of de-occupation. As Manterola says:

*The metaphysical subversion 'healer of death' that the artist has decided to undertake and whose aim is to establish space in place of the material, to replace time with all that dies, the aroma of eternity exhaled by all empty bodies.*<sup>52</sup>

This proposal is a sign of how the concept of 'de-occupation' is manifested architecturally through the urban public space that is loaded with symbolism for the community.

### **Conclusion: 'de-occupation' as ascetic space**

In Oteiza's writing and work concerning 'de-occupation', we can appreciate three overlapping conceptions: de-occupation as the silencing of formal expression; de-occupation as a creative process in search of spiritual perfection; and de-occupation as a way to create ascetic spaces.

The silencing of expression could be understood as a response to the formal debate of late modern architecture, which Moneo often considered irrational. This silence could be also related with ascetism, that considers that just the minimum expression is all that is needed to achieve transcendence – the spiritual salvation that Manterola alluded to in relation to sculpture, and Crespo in relation to architecture. This approach emerged after difficult intellectual reflection; it is a position obtained through meditation. It understands the creative process as a tool for achieving artistic and personal perfection and transcendence; a behaviour that blends life and work and revolves around artistic labour – whether in sculpture or architecture – in a process of salvation, a re-sacralise approach to life as Manterola pointed out. Furthermore, de-occupation could be understood as the design of public spaces that restores the condition of monumentality not only as an ascetic space (designed with the minimum expression in order to achieve spiritual salvation) but also as a social meeting space for the collective life – as, for example, the concrete square at Montevideo. Consequently, it does not appear odd that Oteiza states: 'I moved on to the city', when he considered that his exploration of sculpture and architecture was concluded. It is in the city, understood as the collective transcendental space where the spiritual and social function of the artist could find the place to give back to the community, all that he had learnt throughout his artistic career is manifest.

In the context of Spanish architecture, Oteiza proposed an ascetic response to secularised modern architecture. His working method placed the creation of the architectural project in an ascetic and sacralise discourse, that gives any design a transcendent and spiritual value. Oteiza not only proposed a renunciation of any formal approach to art and architecture, but also a theoretical position that understood artistic creation as a process of salvation, and as an instrument to re-sacralise the world.

## Notes

- Miguel Ángel Alonso del Val, 'Oteiza y la arquitectura: itinerarios entre un espejo y un tunel [Oteiza and the architecture: itineraries between a mirror and a tunnel]', in *Oteiza y lo arquitectónico [Oteiza and the architectonic]* by Emma López-Bahut (Alzuza: Fundación Museo Jorge Oteiza, 2016), pp. 11–14 (p. 14).
- The Oteiza's concept 'desocupación' has been translated into English in different ways. In the Guggenheim's exhibitions (2005) was used 'emptying' both for artworks and in the catalogue. See *Oteiza: Myth and Modernism*, ed. by Margit Rowell and Txomin Badiola (Bilbao: Guggenheim Bilbao Museum, 2005). In Spanish, this term could be confused with 'vaciamiento', Oteiza's strategy of removing part of the statue mass. For this reason, throughout the article, we will use the term 'de-occupation' in order to avoid misunderstandings and to be coherent with previous papers published in the English language. See: Emma López-Bahut, 'From the Collages and Glass Models of Oteiza to the Concrete of Sáenz de Oiza', *VLC*, 3:1 (2016), 55–83 <DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4995/vlc.2016.4255>>.
- Laura Martínez de Guereñu, 'Bauhäusler on the Franco-Spanish Border', *Architectural Histories*, 4:1 (2016), 15 <DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5334/ah.191>>.
- On this period, see: Txomin Badiola, *Catálogo Razonado de escultura: Volumen I, Obra figurativa [Reasoned sculpture catalogue: Volume I, figurative work]* (Pamplona: Fundación Museo Jorge Oteiza y Nerea, 2016), pp. 54–113.
- For further information regarding Oteiza's life, see: Muñoa, *Oteiza: la vida como experimento [Oteiza: life as experiment]* (Irún: Alberdania, 2006) and Carlos Martínez Gorriarán, *Jorge Oteiza hacedor de vacíos [Jorge Oteiza void-maker]* (Madrid: Marcial Pons Ediciones de Historia, 2011).
- Jorge Oteiza, 'Carta a los artistas de América sobre el arte nuevo en la postguerra [Letter to artists of America on new art in the postwar period]', *Arquitectura*, *Revista de la Universidad de Cauca* (1944); Jorge Oteiza, 'Del escultor español Jorge Oteiza: Por él mismo [From the Spanish sculptor Jorge Oteiza by himself]', *Cabalgata*, 3:26 (1948), 6–7.
- Jon Echeverría Plazaola, 'La finalidad del arte: La obra y el pensamiento de Jorge Oteiza: arte, estética y religion [The purpose of art: Jorge Oteiza's work and thinking: art, aesthetics and religion]' (PhD thesis, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 2008), p. 160.
- The different art exhibitions where Oteiza participated are commented at Muñoa, *Oteiza: la vida como experiment*, and Lucía C. Pérez-Moreno, 'La fortuna crítica de Jorge Oteiza [Jorge Oteiza's critical fortune]', in *Fullaondo y la revista Nueva Forma: Aportaciones a la construcción de una cultura arquitectónica en España, 1966–1975 [Fullaondo and the magazine Nueva Forma: contributions to the construction of an architecture culture in Spain, 1966–1975]* (Alzuza: Fundación Museo Jorge Oteiza, 2015), pp. 200–08.
- For further information regarding the role of Oteiza in the defence of abstraction, see: Paula Barreiro López, *La abstracción geométrica en España, 1957–1969 [Geometric abstraction in Spain, 1957–1969]* (Madrid: CSIC, 2009).
- This manuscript was later published at Jorge Oteiza, 'Propósito experimental 1956–57 [Experimental proposal 1956–57]', *Forma Nueva-el Inmueble*, 14 (1967), 24–34.
- López-Bahut, *Oteiza y lo arquitectónico*, p. 31.
- For further information on Oteiza's collaborations with architects, see: López-Bahut, *Oteiza y lo arquitectónico*.
- From 1951 to 1955, six articles on Oteiza were published: Jorge Oteiza, 'La investigación abstracta en la escultura actual [Abstract research in today's sculpture]', *R.N.A.* (1951), 29–31; 'Concurso de una imagen a San Isidro [Contest of an image to San Isidro]', *R.N.A.* (March 1953), 25–7; 'El concurso Internacional de Londres: Protesta del escultor Oteiza [The London International Competition: protest by sculptor Oteiza]', *R.N.A.* (June 1953), 45–8; 'Dos aspectos de la Exposición celebrada en la Galería Fe, organizada por el grupo Artistas de Hoy [Two aspects of the exhibition held at the Fe Gallery organized by today's artist group]', *R.N.A.* (June 1955), 30–3; 'IV Bienal de São Paulo [IV biennial of São Paulo]', *Arquitectura* (December 1957), 33–40; 'Concurso de monumento a José Batlle en Montevideo [José Batlle monument context in Montevideo]', *Arquitectura* (June 1959), 17–23.
- Juan Daniel Fullaondo, *Oteiza 1933–1968* (Madrid: Alfaguara, 1968); Years later, a new revised and extended version of this book was published as a homage to the work of Fullaondo, see VV.AA., *Oteiza: Estética del huevo. Huevo y laberinto. A Juan Daniel Fullaondo en memoria y homenaje [Oteiza: Egg aesthetics. Egg and labyrinth. To Juan Daniel Fullaondo in memory and homage]* (Iruña: Pamiela, 1995). The articles of Oteiza published in *Forma Nueva-el Inmueble* and republished in *Oteiza 1933–68* were: Jorge Oteiza, 'Propósito experimental 1956–1957', *Forma Nueva-el Inmueble*, 14 (1967), 24; Jorge Oteiza, 'Androcanto y sigo [Androcanto and follow]', *Forma Nueva-el Inmueble*, 15 (1967), 30–8; Jorge Oteiza, 'Selección del libro "Quosque tándem...!" [Quosque tandem book selection]', *Forma Nueva-el Inmueble*, 16 (1967), 30–2; Jorge Oteiza, 'Ideología y técnica desde una Ley de los Cambios para el Arte [Ideology and technique from a law on changes for art]', *Forma Nueva-el Inmueble*, 17 (1967), 31–5; Jorge Oteiza, 'Hacia la pintura instantánea, sin espacio y sin tiempo [Towards instant painting without space and without time]', *Forma Nueva-el Inmueble*, 17 (1967), 36–7; Jorge Oteiza, 'El final del arte contemporáneo [The end of contemporary art]', *Forma Nueva-el Inmueble*, 17 (1967), 38–41; Jorge Oteiza, 'Renovación de la estructura en el arte actual [Renovation of the structure in today's art]', *Forma Nueva-el Inmueble*, 19 (1967), 21–2.
- The articles about the work of Oteiza published in *Forma Nueva-el Inmueble* and republished in *Oteiza 1933–68* were: Juan Daniel Fullaondo, 'Jorge de Oteiza, escultor [Jorge de Oteiza, sculptor]', *Forma Nueva-el Inmueble*, 14 (1967), 12–13; Juan Daniel Fullaondo, 'El drama de Aránzazu [Aránzazu drama]', *Forma Nueva-el Inmueble*, 15 (1967), 29; Rafael Moneo, 'Jorge de Oteiza, arquitecto [Jorge de Oteiza, architect]', *Forma Nueva-el Inmueble*, 16 (1967), 22–3; Ángel Crespo, 'Jorge de Oteiza, humanista [Jorge de Oteiza, humanist]', *Forma Nueva-el Inmueble*, 18 (1967), 18–19; Juan Daniel Fullaondo, 'Algunos momentos en la evolución del escultor Jorge de Oteiza [Some moments in the evolution of the sculptor Jorge Oteiza]', *Forma Nueva-el Inmueble*, 18 (1967), 19–28; Ángel Crespo, 'La primera exposición Forma Nueva [The first exhibition Forma Nueva]', *Forma Nueva-el Inmueble*, 18 (1967), 41–5; Juan Daniel Fullaondo, 'Jorge de Oteiza y la crisis del arte contemporáneo [Jorge Oteiza and the crisis of contemporary art]', *Forma Nueva-el Inmueble*, 19 (1967), 18–19.
- For further information about the magazine *Nueva Forma*, see: Pérez-Moreno, *Fullaondo y la revista Nueva Forma*.
- Juan Daniel Fullaondo was in charge of the magazine since



- Forma Nueva-el Inmueble*, 19, in August 1967. The magazine changed its title to *Nueva Forma* in Issue 20. It is significant that the cover of *Forma Nueva-el Inmueble*, 19 has a portrait of Jorge Oteiza on it. To see this cover, consult: Figure 1, Lucía C. Pérez-Moreno and Elena Martínez-Litago, 'Bilbao and the magazine *Nueva Forma*', *Mas Context* 30-1 (2018), 77, available at: <<https://www.mascontext.com/issues/30-31-bilbao/bilbao-and-the-magazine-nueva-forma/>> [accessed 17 February 2021]. Other covers of this magazine included sculptures of Oteiza. See the covers of *Forma Nueva-el Inmueble*, 14 (March 1967) and *Nueva Nueva-el Inmueble*, 89 (June 1973) at the previous article pages 75 and 89.
18. Juan Daniel Fullaondo, 'Presentación al texto 'Propósito Experimental [Presentation to the text Experimental Proposal]', *Forma Nueva-el Inmueble*, 14 (1967), 24-4 (p. 24).
  19. Moneo, 'Jorge de Oteiza, arquitecto', pp. 22-3 (p. 22).
  20. *Ibid.*
  21. *Ibid.*
  22. Rafael Moneo, 'A la conquista de lo irracional [To the conquest of irrational]', *Arquitectura*, 87 (1966), 1-6 (p. 5).
  23. Fullaondo, 'Jorge de Oteiza y la crisis del Arte Contemporáneo'; Fullaondo, 'Jorge de Oteiza, escultor'.
  24. For further information about how Bruno Zevi was understood by Fullaondo, see: Lucía C. Pérez-Moreno, 'Writing the History of Spanish Modern Architecture: Texts by Flores and Fullaondo from the 1960s', *The Journal of Architecture*, 22:2, 273-92 <DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2017.1299196>>.
  25. Crespo, 'Jorge de Oteiza, humanista', 18-19 (p. 18).
  26. Soledad Álvarez, *Jorge Oteiza: pasión y razón [Jorge Oteiza: passion and reason]* (San Sebastián: Nerea, 2003); Ángel Bados, *Oteiza: Laboratorio experimental [Oteiza: experimental laboratory]* (Alzuza: Fundación Museo Jorge Oteiza, 2008). This book is in open access at Oteiza Foundation. Pictures of all Oteiza's sculptures commented in this article can be found at: <[http://www.museooteiza.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Oteiza\\_Laboratorio2.pdf](http://www.museooteiza.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Oteiza_Laboratorio2.pdf)>; Pedro Manterola, 'Oteiza: Pasión de la ausencia y la nostalgia [Oteiza: Passion of absence and nostalgia]', *Revista internacional de estudios vascos*, 48:2 (2003), 551-76; Txomin Badiola, *Oteiza: Catálogo Razonado de Escultura*.
  27. Bados, *Oteiza: Laboratorio experimental*, p. 35.
  28. Manterola, 'Oteiza: Pasión de la ausencia y la nostalgia', p. 563.
  29. To see the image of Oteiza's *Homenaje a Mallarmé*, consult: Figure 3, Antonio Juárez and Lucía C. Pérez-Moreno, 'Oteiza's Chalk Laboratory as Architecture Discovery', *The Journal of Architectural Education*, 72:1 (2018), 67-77 <DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10464883.2018.1410663>>; Jorge Oteiza defines 'Malevich units' in his text 'Experimental Proposal' as minimal metal formal units subjected to various formal actions, such as bending, extraction, joining, such that the statue does not occupy a space, but contains space, a purely spacial body' and is defined 'as active de-occupation of the Space by fusion of light formal units.
  30. Manterola, 'Oteiza: Pasión de la ausencia y la nostalgia', p. 567.
  31. Pedro Manterola, *La escultura de Jorge Oteiza: una interpretación [The sculpture of Jorge Oteiza: an interpretation]* (Alzuza: Fundación Museo Jorge Oteiza, 2006), p. 25.
  32. Manterola, 'Oteiza: Pasión de la ausencia y la nostalgia', p. 559.
  33. *Ibid.* p. 561. Manterola also points out that 'Oteiza always vehemently argued for 'a Basque art and culture impregnated with the old, ancestral, spiritual, severe and religious, which speaks of a legendary people; a spirit on which the sculptor attempted nothing less than to base a national aesthetic'.
  34. The scheme won the Spanish National Award for Architecture in 1955 and was highlighted at R.N.A and *Forma Nueva-el Inmueble* as one of the most important Oteiza's architectural collaborations.
  35. To see images of the Sanctuary of Arantzazu, consult: Figure 9 Emma López-Bahut, 'Jorge Oteiza's Interpretation of "Architecture as Space" through his Thoughts and Drawings, and its Influence in his Architectural Projects', *EGA*, 21:28 (2016), 114-25 <DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4995/ega.2016.6051>>; and Figure 1, Emma López Bahut, 'The Wall as a Spatial Work: The Reliefs of Jorge Oteiza in Architecture (1951-1958)', *VLC*, 1:1 (2014), 31-58 <DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4995/vlc.2014.1896>>.
  36. Oteiza's original manuscript written in Oñate on 1 December 1953 and reproduced at Javier González de Durana, *Arquitectura y escultura en la Basílica de Aránzazu: anteproyecto, proyecto y construcción, 1950-1955 [Architecture and sculpture in the Basílica of Aranzazu: preliminary draft, project and construction, 1950-1955]* (Vitoria-Gasteiz: Artium, 2006), pp. 167-9. Oteiza wrote: 'Each image ends with the immediate one and is fulfilled in the whole of the Frieze, it is completed with the Wall, justifying itself with the architecture and the Landscape organically [...] The work process turns out to be quite complicated and difficult and only at the end is everything organically defined.'
  37. Original Oteiza's letter wrote on 6 December 1954 and reproduced at González de Durana, *Arquitectura y escultura en la Basílica de Aránzazu: anteproyecto, proyecto y construcción*, pp. 178-81. Oteiza wrote: 'What we intend in Arantzazu - perhaps for the first time in Europe - is to create a religious space resulting from the intimate conjunction of architecture with painting and sculpture [...] We understand that a piece of our painting or a piece of our sculpture, cannot be qualified in isolation of Catholic or non-Catholic art, but the behaviour of the religious space that they contribute to create and whose expression is the goal we have set ourselves.'
  38. Manterola, *La escultura de Jorge Oteiza: una interpretación*, p. 15.
  39. For further information and images regarding the Chamber of Commerce of Cordoba, see: Emma López-Bahut, 'Hybrids for a Space under Construction: The Intervention of Jorge Oteiza in the Chamber of Commerce of Córdoba (1953-54)', in *Architecture Anthology II: Architects, Design, and Education*, ed. by Stavros Alifragkis and Nicholas Patricios (Athens: Athens Institute for Education and Research ATINER, 2015), pp. 49-68.
  40. For images of the Chapel on the Camino de Santiago, see: Figure 3, López Bahut, 'The Wall as a Spatial Work'.
  41. Francisco Javier Sáenz Guerra, *Un mito moderno: una Capilla en el Camino de Santiago, Sáenz de Oiza, Oteiza y Romani, 1954 [A modern myth: a Chapel on the Road of Santiago, Sáenz de Oiza, Oteiza and Romani, 1954]* (Alzuza: Fundación Museo Jorge Oteiza, 2007), p. 61.
  42. Months after, the *Revista Nacional de Arquitectura* organised a session to debate the project in which several Spanish architects participated and Oiza defended the proposal and its ability to represent Christian ideals, despite the lack of details and symbols to represent Christian liturgy, with the same arguments that Oteiza had defended his statuary for the Sanctuary at Arantzazu years before. 'Sesión crítica de arquitectura: una capilla en el camino de Santiago [Critical architectural sesión: a Chapel on the Road of Santiago]', *Revista*

- Nacional de Arquitectura*, 161, 14–25.
43. Fullaondo, *Oteiza 1933–68*, p. 34.
44. For further information and images regarding the 'Light wall' experiments, see: López Bahut, 'The Wall as a Spatial Work'.
45. Oteiza, 'Propósito experimental 1956–57', pp. 24–34.
46. To view the photographs of the model of the Monument to José Batlle, see Figure 7 and Figure 11, Antonio Marín, 'Anacronismos: 1958, el proyecto de Jorge Oteiza para el monumento a José Batlle en Montevideo', *Zarch*, 6, 120–33 <DOI: [https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs\\_zarch/zarch.201661457](https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_zarch/zarch.201661457)>.
47. Jorge Oteiza, 'La ciudad como obra de arte [City as a work of art]', Alzuza: Jorge Oteiza Foundation, unpublished manuscript (1958), AFMJO Pre-75, valen 58.car-7 (p. 2). AFMJO ID: 10075.
48. Jorge Oteiza and Roberto Puig, 'Memoria del proyecto de monumento a Batlle. Memoria. Primer grado [Memory of the Batlle monument project. Memory. First grade]', Alzuza: Jorge Oteiza Foundation, unpublished manuscript (1958), pp. 7–8. AFMJO ID: 18054.
49. For further information about the project and pictures of the model, see: Marín, 'Anacronismos'.
50. Oteiza and Puig, 'Memoria del proyecto de monumento a Batlle', pp. 7–8.
51. Oteiza and Puig, 'Memoria del proyecto de monumento a Batlle. Memoria. Segundo grado [Memory of the Batlle monument project. Memory. Second grade]', Alzuza: Jorge Oteiza Foundation, unpublished manuscript (1958), pp. 10, 12. AFMJO ID: 18054.
52. Manterola, *La escultura de Jorge Oteiza: una interpretación*, p. 559.

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#### Competing interests

The authors declare none.

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