

AFTER THE MANIFESTO

EDITED BY
CRAIG BUCKLEY

ARCHITECTURE

Volume 1

WESBODEN

AFTER THE MANIFESTO

**WRITING, ARCHITECTURE, AND
MEDIA IN A NEW CENTURY**

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6

**AFTER
THE MANIFESTO**
CRAIG BUCKLEY

24

**FROM MANIFESTO
TO DISCOURSE**
ANTHONY VIDLER

40

**MANIFESTO
ARCHITECTURE**
BEATRIZ COLOMINA

62

**ANONYMOUS
MANIFESTOS**
RUBÉN A. ALCOLEA &
HÉCTOR GARCÍA-DIEGO

76

**THE ALHAMBRA
PALACE, THE KATSURA
OF THE WEST**
JOSÉ MANUEL POZO &
JOSÉ ÁNGEL MEDINA

THE LAST MANIFESTO
CARLOS LABARTA
& JORGE TÁRRAGO

92

**CONTEMPORARY
ARCHITECTURE AND THE
MANIFESTO GENRE**
JUAN M. OTXOTORENA

110

TOURNAMENTS
FELICITY SCOTT

120

**RETROACTIVE
MANIFESTOS**
ENRIQUE WALKER

140

MANIFESTO FEVER
MARK WIGLEY

152

**ARCHITECTURAL
MANIFESTOS**
BERNARD TSCHUMI

172

CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE AND THE MANIFESTO GENRE

JUAN M. OTXOTORENA

THE AIM OF THIS ESSAY is to contribute to the debate on the relevance of the manifesto in contemporary architecture.¹ Underlying this debate is a question: What is the state of the manifesto in the current culture of architecture? In a sense the manifesto is an artifact of the past, its form associated with the Modern Movement and polemical practices that arose in its wake. Ulrich Conrads's anthology *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture* (1964, German; and 1970, English), for instance, was already laden with an air of nostalgia; it sought to mark a before and after and open a new chapter for the manifesto.² The book had identified the demise of a literary genre that had intensely considered the "obligations of architecture" to society and to the discipline itself. The manifesto was rhetorically *de rigueur* for the avant-garde of the early twentieth century; it was widely cultivated in speeches and propaganda from Leninists to Dadaists. But the form has fallen out of fashion. What follows sketches out some possible explanations.

The first, and most obvious, is the spectacular change of cultural circumstances. Historical conditions might not be more demanding or complex than they were in the past, but the societal relationship to history has changed. The voice of the avant-garde has lost its vigor; the future is no longer a territory to be conquered but rather a site of trepidation, or worse, disinterest. Today's scholarship debates the consequences of "The End of History."³ And while our era still has produced movements that voice collective claims, the tone has changed.

Shifting attitudes in Spanish architecture reflect these larger forces of cultural change. In the decades preceding the 1950s, Spanish architects strove to assert their cutting-edge sensibilities and vociferously supported the Modern Movement. They were countering a public perception anchored in nostalgic notions of tradition and the picturesque, with entrenched tastes bordering on kitsch. After this period, however, little more than lip service was paid to the defense of architecture as a cultural and artistic discipline.

During the 1930s, vibrant, spirited manifestos favoring the new architecture in Spain abounded. The impassioned exhortations of the Grupo de Artistas y Técnicos Españoles para la Arquitectura Contemporánea (GATEPAC) were undoubtedly significant in the years just before the Spanish Civil War (1936–39).⁴ They demonstrate a strong combination of optimism, faith, and energy. Twenty years later, there appeared the ambitious debates around the famous *Manifiesto de la Alhambra* (1953),⁵ led by the architect and scholar Fernando Chueca; on Luis Moya's critical positions against modernity in the main architectural magazine of the country at the time, *Revista Nacional de Arquitectura*,⁶ or about the founding

ideology of Grupo R (R Group) in Catalonia.⁷ However, things would change drastically in the ensuing decades.

The 1960s marked a turning point in architectural rhetoric. The Modern Movement was undergoing disciplinary critique. Meanwhile, in Spain, the profession had found solid economic footing. There was plenty of work for a new generation of well-prepared architects; the interaction between architecture and the arts was becoming stronger (as Chillida and Oteiza's work shows); new architecture schools were emerging (in Seville, Valencia, Navarra, Valladolid, and Coruña among other places); and intellectual debate was taking root. Practitioners were making statements, not leveling theoretical claims. Yet, production and pragmatism prevailed over philosophical discussion and the space for the manifesto was shrinking.

This shift started with the famous essay written in 1961 by the architect José Antonio Coderch: "No son genios lo que necesitamos ahora" (It is not geniuses that we need now).⁸ This essay portrays the mindset of a whole generation, and for more than twenty years dominated discourse. It is a true manifesto. Frequently translated and omnipresent during its time, this manifesto asserts the social mission of the architect. It is singular not because it was an outlier, but because it was unanimously accepted. Until the end of the 1970s it was printed on extra-large sized posters emphatically placed on the doors of architecture schools.

Traces of its zeal are palpable in certain contemporary proclamations denouncing what was seen as a sad decline of the discipline. The proclamations of Esteve Bonell and his team of architects defending the dignity of the profession in 1998 come to mind,⁹ or the positions represented by the group Arquitectes per l'Arquitectura (AxA).¹⁰ These groups are motivated by a love of the architectural profession and a strong ethical conviction, backed by the solid accomplishments of their members.

Coderch aside, in the Spanish context it seems there have been hardly any proper manifestos since the 1950s, and none before the "modern revolution." If there are any, they refer only to the unstable future of the architectural profession. Their scarcity has to do with their fatalism. We should take a look at the causes of this.

The phenomenon responds to the increasingly evident difficulties for the survival and "salvation" of the archetype of the traditional Spanish architect: the autonomous, independent, and craft-oriented architect. Legally, the architect had the main role in controlling building processes, and was used to working according to personal standards—technical and ethical—in what was perceived as a craft of ingenuity, inventiveness,

and individual responsibility. Changes in capitalism and a market increasingly focused on expendability have marginalized such a traditional profile and altered the value of design. It seems that design increases the product's price and only adds additional energy consumption.

What this produces is not only a romantic way of understanding and organizing the the work of building, which has given rise in part to an image of the architect-as-*prima donna*. It also yields a working that might generate unbearably overbudgeted construction and added management complexity and insecurities. Unsurprisingly, especially in a climate of economic recession, this diminishes the reputation of the architect in the larger society. This is, at least for the Italian architect Gio Ponti (who participated in events with Grupo R), what underlies Spanish architecture's international recognition, which is certainly endangered.¹¹

There was a time for impassioned speeches in favor of the rationality of modern abstraction, but the era of an architecture so concerned with its identity as art and cultural discipline has subsided. The profession faces new questions now, but it has perhaps retained that introverted process of reflection formed in the infancy of modernity.

We have seen two great moments regarding program statements: those related to the campaign favoring the modern movement, and our current claims about the profession. Meanwhile, history has witnessed new stances regarding its "calling" that, although they might sometimes disregard the classical format of the manifesto, invoke its spirit.

The latter includes the ideas of collectives or movements needing to vocalize a radical direction amid the magma of an entropic reality. A similar relationship to the past can be found in the varying "isms" that have been replacing one another in the architectural scene. These have riffed on discourses of the past century to reveal themselves authentically "modern," thus contributing to radical change in the figurative arts and offering alternative modernisms.

The manifesto finds a certain continuity in the vibrating succession of modernism's iterative orthodoxy, which we have been witnessing since before Team Ten's honest opening toward the vernacular.¹² Revisionist stances taken by the so-called Second and Third Generation fall in line,¹³ as do alternative ethos like organicism, the rediscovery of the "space age,"¹⁴ and the new utopia linked to pop culture—visible in the work of groups like Archigram.¹⁵ There is, however, a clear distance between these positions and ambitious modernist pronouncements. They no longer deal with bombastic assertive statements of the new, but rather with a

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response they generate over time, articulated in terms of rebellion and disobedience.¹⁶

In the context of postmodernism¹⁷ they become even more radical, their uninhibited turmoil giving rise to new narratives and developing the conceptual axis for possible neo-avant-gardes.¹⁸ Among these are Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, including all its anti-establishment sensibility and advocacy for an "architecture parlante" adapted to consumerism; the consolidation of a vaguely neoclassic "tendency" around Aldo Rossi and his famous *L'architettura della città*; and even the linguistic formalism found in the work of the New York Five.¹⁹

This too, though, is the past. We have reshaped the discourse once again. The catharsis linked to deconstructivism, which views itself as a new beginning with its revolutionary frame for formal experimentation, can also be seen as an end, a means of foreclosing the manifesto's polemical cry.²⁰ The contradictions of deconstructivism in many ways mark the apex of the last century of architectural thought.

So, the spirit of "isms" has faded, we have exhausted linguistic inspiration; a show business logic and a fascination with the image dominate the evolution of our information and consumer society.²¹ This generalization is especially true regarding the crisis of the Spanish professional model. The classical role of what up until now was considered a craft is gasping its last breath. What seems to be succeeding it is an animated rivalry among anonymous brands adapted to the dynamics of commercial strategies, expensive signature design, and "ready-to-wear" standardized offerings. Design now appears subject to a systematic and, perhaps, unconscious processes of cross-pollination and emulation, competing to forge a "new frontier" in our marketing culture. Thus, we face a profession with a crisis; a discipline without aim. The banal and anti-conceptual practices have obtained power and demonstrate no restraint.

However, all is not lost. Today there is also cause for grand statements and optimistic sentiment. We oscillate between ethics and show business, between method and stardom, between systematic and relativistic rigor, between magnanimous service and narcissistic self-contemplation, between hard-working craft and the inhumane alienation of anonymous production, between social idealism and the sad "trash-TV" audience, between mastery and performance, between intense aesthetic demands and vain blazes of showmanship.

Every architect is called to position herself or himself in relation to this dichotomy. Yet, it is critical to pause and assess the two poles and

consider their seeming contradictions; and it is prudent to avoid excesses at either end of the pendulum. The language of violent diatribes and agitated gesticulations may be flashy and feel urgent, but in the end it is excessive, unsustainable, and serves no tangible purpose. It will have very little effect on the professional scene. Controversy in fact can lend attention and legitimacy to weak and ill-founded positions. Among other things, there are new arguments to assimilate: as infuriated as we might be by rampant banality or frivolous architecture, we cannot maintain a discourse rigidly bound to the traditional argument of the proportion between means and goals without opening it to an already unavoidable broader horizon.

A conclusion could be as follows:

1.

There is a need to channel the outrage caused by the architectural insanities generated by our society. We are undoubtedly disturbed by the economic crisis we have been suffering since the end of 2008. It has caught us off balance, both experts and laymen, and there are plenty of explanations that might serve to direct our future actions.

It is one thing, however, to channel social outrage—something that is probably necessary but easily subject to changing moods. It is a very different thing to solve the problems behind this outrage. We must measure our words and not let initial perceptions turn into conclusions right away to avoid reactionary analysis and antagonistic logics.

2.

Circumstances call for positions, individually and collectively, as analysts and activists, in the intellectual realm and the professional field. In general terms, we are no longer modern. What this essay suggests is that architecture is about to be substituted by show business style and banal standardization. In this case there would be only one pending manifesto: the one condemning it.

Many would subscribe to an aspiration toward an ethical architecture, committed to the observance of the classical standards of technical rigor, economic rationality, functional efficiency, spatial qualities, and formal reliability (*utilitas, firmitas, and venustas*). They would vehemently rail against the idea that architecture is merely devoted to showy facades and high-revenue real estate. However, as has been said, one must go beyond the realm of the mere reactive protest.

One should be suspicious of the hand-wringers and doomsayers, the harsh cadence of the close minded. Architects should find their

voice in the poetics of conversation; they should embrace questions and critique. These are the things that bolster conviction.

At the same time, we are not free from the temptation to cooperate with the forces battling to drag us toward disaster. Without vigilance and principles one could end up aligning with the empty ghostly architecture we so deeply scorn. But we must be fair: to a great extent everybody ends up doing the architecture they can. Choice is a bit of a luxury, and there is always someone willing to meet the demand.

3.

The "symbolic manifesto" is currently valid: it warns us, and it has a symptomatic role that we must not disdain.

4.

And, finally, there are the interstices of polarized discourse, the spaces between service and image, or rigor and show business, that push our understanding and call for new methods. Gaudy commercialism and pure form are not as easy to isolate as one would desire in order to renounce them. Efforts to marginalize them run the risk of only further validating their existence.

The drift of modern architecture toward a simple International Style, for example, could not have been more tragic. Its reduction to a mere fashion was defined in terms of language. We cannot forget Mies's famous aphorism: "We refuse to recognize problems of form, but only problems of building. Form is not the aim of our work..."²² This sort of rejection of shape is always inherently paradoxical.²³

So in this climate of crisis, a bit of careful consideration could go a long way. There is no time like the present to reflect on the basic principles that undergird the practice of architecture. It is not a matter of keeping the architect from shaping the world; architects will always be compelled by "the obligation to build," as Manfredo Tafuri would say.²⁴ A look to the past, though, sheds light on the complexity of current circumstances, and may even bring into them the optimism of an earlier era.

1 The validity of the manifesto as a genre in contemporary architecture was the topic of a symposium titled "What Happened to the Architectural Manifesto?" organized in November 2011 by Columbia University in collaboration with the University of Navarra School of Architecture at Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation.

2 See Ulrich Conrads, *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1970).

3 See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992), and *The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstitution of Social Order* (New York: Free Press, 1999), or even Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 22–49. Also see Alba A. Fernández, *Los axiomas del crepúsculo: Ética y estética de la arquitectura*, Serie Arte, Perspectivas (Madrid: Hermann Blume, 1990).

4 See, for example, José Manuel Aizpurúa, "Cuándo habrá arquitectura?," *La Gaceta Literaria*, March 1, 1930, as well as the complete collection of consecutive issues of *AC* magazine compiled as facsimile in Francesc Roca Rossell, ed., *AC GATEPAC 1931–1937* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1975).

5 On this subject see Fernando Chueca Goitia, *Invariantes castizos de la arquitectura española; Invariantes de la arquitectura hispanoamericana; Manifiesto de la Alhambra* (Madrid: DOSSAT, 1979). In 1950, backed by *Arquitectura*, the magazine of Madrid's official architects' association (Colegio de Arquitectos de Madrid) a group of architects started meeting periodically to discuss the situation of their profession though the analysis of the most relevant buildings in Spanish architectural history. The discussion turned toward the "modern and contemporary" value of a building that had begun construction in the thirteenth century: the Alhambra in Granada. Two years after starting these sessions, the architects decided to visit Granada and hold their debates at the Alhambra to discuss the building itself. When the October 1952 meeting ended, Fernando Chueca Goitia summarized all of his notes and wrote a document that would

become known as the *Manifiesto de la Alhambra*, a long text that stated among its conclusions that the Alhambra constituted an "essential reservoir for modern architecture." Also see *Manifiesto de la Alhambra*, with a prologue by Fernando Chueca Goitia, preliminary studies by Ángel Isac, and coda by Emilio de Santiago Simón (Granada, Spain: Fundación Rodríguez-Acosta/Delegación en Granada del Colegio Oficial de Arquitectos de Andalucía Oriental, 1993) and Ángel Isac, ed., *El Manifiesto de la Alhambra 50 años después: El monumento y la arquitectura contemporánea/The Alhambra Manifesto 50 Years Later: The Monument and Contemporary Architecture*, Monografías de la Alhambra 01, (Granada, Spain: Patronato de la Alhambra y el Generalife, 2006).

6 See Luis Moya, "Tradicionalistas, funcionalistas y otros" (I and II), *Revista Nacional de Arquitectura* 102 and 103, 1960.

7 See Centro de Cultura Contemporánea de Barcelona, *Grupo R: Una revisión de la modernidad 1951–1961* (Barcelona: Centro de Cultura Contemporánea de Barcelona/Institut d'Edicions de la Diputació de Barcelona, 1997).

8 José Antonio Coderch's "No son genios lo que necesitamos ahora," a celebrated programmatic text presenting the moral stance of its author, was widely disseminated; it was originally published in *Domus* in November 1961. I have written on this subject; see, for example, Juan Miguel Otxotorena, "La arquitectura del No o las grandes palabras y los viejos maestros (notas a propósito de Coderch)," in *BAU: Revista de Arquitectura* 8/9, (1993), 124–137.

9 A 1998 manifesto, untitled but widely disseminated, referred to the state of Spanish architecture and was signed by Esteve Bonell along with 500 other signatories.

10 See the text of "Acto de presentación de AxA," which introduced *Arquitectes per l'Arquitectura* (AxA) and was read aloud solemnly at the Barcelona Pavilion on June 16, 2011: <http://www.arqxa.es/docs/ActopresentacionAxA.pdf>.

11 On this subject also see, for example, Terence Riley, ed., *On-Site. New Architecture in*

Spain (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2006).

12 See Mirko Zardini, "Dal Team X al Team x/From Team X to Team x," *Lotus International*, 95 (1997): 76-97.

13 See Philip Drew, *Third Generation: The Changing Meaning of Architecture* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1972).

14 On this subject see, for example, Bruno Zevi, *Saper vedere l'architettura [Architecture as Space]* (Milan: Einaudi, 2009; originally published 1948).

15 See Peter Cook, ed., *Archigram* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999; facsimile of edition originally published 1972); and Dennis Crampton, ed., *Concerning Archigram* (London: Archigram Archives, 1999).

16 I have addressed this issue in, among other places, Juan Miguel Otxotorena, *Arquitectura y proyecto moderno: La pregunta por la modernidad* (Barcelona: Ediciones Internacionales Universitarias, 1989).

17 On this subject see Juan Miguel Otxotorena, *La lógica del post. Arquitectura y cultura de la crisis* (Valladolid: Universidad de Valladolid, 1992).

18 See Helio Piñón, *Reflexión histórica de la arquitectura moderna* (Barcelona: Península, 1981); and Helio Piñón, *Arquitectura de las neovanguardias* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1984).

19 See The Museum of Modern Art, *Five Architects: Eisenman, Graves, Gwathmey, Hejduk, Meier* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1972.)

20 See Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley, *Deconstructivist Architecture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1988).

21 See, for example, my essays: Juan Miguel Otxotorena, "Dibujo y arquitectura, nostalgias y desmentidos," *EGA-Revista de Expresión Gráfica Arquitectónica* 14 (2009): 60-67; and "Arquitectura y 'blandografías': Notas para un debate obligado," *EGA-Revista de Expresión*

Gráfica Arquitectónica 17 (2011): 66-69. Also see Aitor Goitia Cruz, "Soft Show," in *Actas del XIII Congreso Internacional de Expresión Gráfica Arquitectónica*, vol. 2 (Valencia, Spain: Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, 2010), 91-96.

22 See Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, "Bauen," *G 2* (1923).

23 On this subject see, for example, María Teresa Muñoz, "Prologue" to Henry Russell-Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *El Estilo Internacional: Arquitectura desde 1922 [The International Style: Architecture Since 1922]* (Murcia, Spain: Colegio Oficial de Aparejadores y Arquitectos Técnicos de Murcia, 1984). Also see Otxotorena, *Arquitectura y proyecto moderno: La pregunta por la modernidad*, and Juan Miguel Otxotorena, *La construcción de la forma: Para una aproximación contemporánea al análisis de la arquitectura* (Pamplona: T6 Ediciones, 1999).

24 See Manfredo Tafuri, *La sfera e il labirinto: Avanguardia e architettura da Piranesi agli anni '70* (Turin: Einaudi, 1980); and Manfredo Tafuri, *Teorie e storia dell'architettura* [Theories and History of Architecture] (Bari, Italy: Laterza, 1968)