AFTER THE MANIFESTO

EDITED BY CRAIG BUCKLEY
AFTER THE MANIFESTO
WRITING, ARCHITECTURE, AND MEDIA IN A NEW CENTURY
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GSAPP BOOKS T6) EDICIONES
Give him alms, woman,  
for there is nothing sadder in life  
than being blind in Granada

—Francisco Alarcón de Icaza

"THE ALHAMBRA WILL UNDOUBTEDLY CONTINUE to provide humanity with an essential wellspring of beauty," the Spanish architect Carlos Jiménez recently wrote. In these few words, with their simple yet sensitive expression, Jiménez captured a principle that would prove obvious to any careful observer of this architectural monument. The same sensory evidence of that beauty, however, can become an obstacle to perceiving the invisible attributes it possesses—the determinant values that turn this palace into a true stone manifesto of perennial value, as Jiménez pointed out.

If, instead, we are distracted by its prepossessing appearance or the decoration of its surfaces (outstanding though they may be), or if we simply regard the structure as an eminent relic or incomparable evidence of the artistic wisdom of an ancient time—from its origins in the year 889 across the centuries of its construction—we would miss what is most important about the Alhambra. That is what cannot be perceived with the senses but must be perceived with the mind; the intellectual vision announced by Goethe when he asserted that "those who can only appreciate an experience do not understand that the experience is only half of an experience."

Much has been written—and will continue to be written—about Granada’s Alhambra, one of the most outstanding jewels of Hispano-Arabic culture (and indeed the whole of Islamic art), and there is much to say about its construction, character, and evolution. But it has not necessarily been considered in terms of what it represents for the qualities of contemporary architecture worldwide, and in Spain in particular. Its past, its appearance, and its history have been widely studied, but little attention has been paid to its essence, to which it owes its past and future importance (as well as its touristic and historical significance) and its seductive beauty.

The Alhambra is unique in the Western world, yet finds its parallel in another palace with which it shares many elements and which has been considered an early materialization of modern architecture: the Katsura Imperial Villa in Kyoto, Japan (1). The wonder and admiration that traditional Japanese architecture aroused in Walter Gropius is well known, and led him to write the following enthusiastic words to Le Corbusier: "Dear Corbu, all what we have been fighting for has its parallel in old Japanese culture. This rock-garden of Zen monks in the thirteenth century—stones
and raked white pebbles—an elating spot of peace. You would be as excited as I am in this 2,000-year-old space of cultural wisdom.  However, in spite of the enthusiasm and sincerity of the words used by Gropius to recognize his surprise and, implicitly, his prior ignorance of Katsura, we can attribute only an indirect effect on the work of Gropius himself and that of his contemporaries—at least a posteriori.

Mark Wigley’s astute observations concerning Jørn Utzon’s travels during the development of his Sydney Opera House project (and his “discovery” of Japanese and other national architectures during his travels) shed some light on why this might be so. Wigley recalls the typical journey of the interested and thoughtful architect, during which the architect discovers what he was really looking for—something that he somehow already knew, of course, and that is why he ends up finding it. Therefore what the traveler actually does is recognize “what he already knows” rather than discover it. Undoubtedly, Gropius’s first trip to the East was one of these journeys,

one of recognition and confirmation of what he already knew rather than of discovery; and if we pay attention to the strong Eastern backdrop ex origine that can be associated with modern abstraction (as I have recently tried to point out in another context) we could probably make this claim for Gropius’s journeys even more strongly than we can for Utzon’s.

The Katsura Palace and its gardens became an evocative, dreamy Arcadia for the most refined and vanguard architects, and an iconic reference for modern architecture, which saw the palace as a paradigm of formal and constructive ideals (2). The spaces and gardens of the Alhambra possess similar qualities. For this reason the architecture of the Alhambra is also present, consciously or unconsciously, in many of the achievements of Western architecture of the twentieth century and especially in Spanish architecture. As in the case of Katsura, this results not from the seduction that its shapes or its decoration have exercised as a source of inspiration, but from its abstract qualities and the strength of its “soul”—what Spanish architect Fernando Chueca Goitia tried to portray and propose as a model for his contemporaries with the Manifesto of the Alhambra (Manifiesto de

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already aware that in order to contribute to the progress of their society, it was necessary to find a new direction for their work and for architectural education. Isolated because of two wars—a civil war followed by a foreign conflict—the country had been immersed in two decades of disconnection from the international cultural, political, and economic world. The isolation had been no less in architecture, producing an understandable introversion that turned to history for the stability and excellence that it was lacking, as stated in the introduction of the Manifesto of the Alhambra: “Spain had to retrieve its greatness; thus it seems fair that it would dress itself with the splendors of an imperial past... It was not the fury, the peculiarity, nor the traditional leanings that were the concern; it was the hieratic character, the gravity, the immobile majesty of politics that needed to be restored. We kept on, as we keep on.”

The aforementioned Moya, who was by this time an intellectual authority in Spain, did not want to join in the so-called Critical Sessions held at the Alhambra—where the stakes of Spanish architecture’s history and future were debated—although he had attended previous meetings. Moya advocated the need to maintain the forms of “Spanish classicism”—forms that were subject to his own interpretation. At the same time he despised functionalism, Le Corbusier’s rationalism, Wright’s organic architecture, and, in short, all modern forms and accomplishments as incorrect or wrongly built.

The Catalan architects of Grupo R, however, wanted to become the heirs of the seminal 1931 CIAM offshoot known as GATEPAC (Grupo de Artistas y Técnicos Españoles para la Arquitectura Contemporánea), by cultivating their somewhat mythicized international aesthetic. In that sense, Bohigas’s optimistic interpretation of Josep Lluís Sert’s Central Antituberculosis Clinic and Casa Bloc as Spain’s only two strictly modern works is enlightening; for Bohigas everything else was marked by an eclecticism that started with the Alhambra. That is perhaps why Codex—not fond of Bohigas’s manners—left Grupo R even though it had been founded in his own architecture office. If Moya was searching for the support of historical vernacular tradition, Catalan architects sought to “integrate the architectural practice into the European context,” as has been pointed out by the architect Juan Miguel Hernández León. Thus, both the Catalan architects and Moya proposed formal models rather than conceptual ones, resulting in a brief and ephemeral form of validation.

The “alhambrinos” (as those who met in Granada in 1952 were known), or at least the core adherents, as not all of them were so adamant, sensed that the problem was deeper. It was not an issue of style, but of soul.
A timeless building, embodying optimism and vitality, the Alhambra seemed the perfect gathering place to consider a properly Spanish architecture (4). The importance of the Manifesto of the Alhambra, then, was its function as a wake-up call, to acknowledge the true influence and validity of Granada's palace as much greater than commonly recognized. Indeed, even as its influence became greater, it grew more difficult to specify the details of its legacy in terms of its plastic form or in the functional scheme. Its influence stems from the restoration of pre-Renaissance popular Hispano-Arabic architecture—which in many senses is the same as calling it “modern,” if we think along the same lines as Wilhelm Worringer when he referred to abstraction and formal asceticism of ancient times, without the later introduction of stylistic additions.\(^{10}\)

At the same time, the perception of the Alhambra as plastically eclectic, as pointed out by Bohigas, is a positive factor. Thus, the authors of the Manifesto saw “a great advantage for those seeking creative incentives” in the fact that “the floor plan of the Escorial Monastery could fit perfectly a ministry; while the Alhambra is perfectly useless for modern life.”\(^{11}\) The strength of the building lies in the fact that it serves no specific function, and this is its main virtue and the reason for its permanence: “Precisely because the Alhambra is not usable in an immediate way as functional architecture is the reason that we regard it with such joy.”\(^{12}\)

Beyond the impact that the Alhambra had on these visitors, the building encapsulates in stone and lime the essential issues of the most characteristic architecture of the twentieth century, similar to what occurred with traditional Japanese architecture, but perhaps even more clearly. We cannot consider the Nasrid dynasty palaces of the Alhambra solely as the Spanish (or Western) Katsura. The Alhambra merits the same aura of purity with which the Japanese imperial palace has been regarded, turning its architecture and gardens into even a spiritual reference. But the Alhambra has signified something else, due to its geographical position and its cultural and historical context, of which it is an eminent but not unique example.

Those meeting at the Alhambra were seeking the advice its stones could offer: they were hoping to be able to capture the centuries-old wisdom trapped within the Alhambra’s walls, and from the stillness of its gardens unfold the secrets that turned the building into a monument—a monument as Louis Kahn defined it, a timeless building that goes beyond simply wealth or large size to create a sense of serenity and an adequate proportion in a given place or a given landscape.\(^{13}\) This is the fundamental characteristic, allowing for a building to insert itself in the tradition of the place that hosts it, which it will later own, as a predominant element in the landscape, whether rural or urban, and regardless of its size.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, Japanese and other Orientalist tendencies had spread throughout Europe and internationally, fed partly by Romanticism and curiosity, but primarily encouraged by the aspiration to find new ways of expression for architecture that might overcome the exhaustion point reached by the increasingly eclectic Mannerism of western art. An “Alhambra” branch came out of this general trend, imitating the shapes and ornaments of the courtyards and living rooms of the Granada palace and reaching extremes we now consider grotesque. Examples of this include Owen Jones’s rebuilding of the Alhambra in the second Crystal Palace (Sydenham, England, 1854); the trompe l’oeil used by a Frenchman by the name of Dermaz as the foundation of his L’Andalousie au temps des Maures pavilion at the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris; and the reproduction of the Court of the Lions in the Spanish Pavilion at the 1910 Exposition Universelle in Brussels by Modesto Cordoya, which gave way to forms inspired to a lesser or greater extent by the Alhambra in “civic” works such as the later Xifré Palace in Madrid and the “shocking” Alhambra Palace Hotel, built in 1910 by Cordoya at the heart of Grenada’s Albaiçin—the
old Moorish quarter of the city—where its heavy, pseudo-Arabic mass still stands today.

But all these, along with many other examples that could be cited, demonstrate an inspiration based on imitation—a copy or the emulation of the formal and ornamental aspects—but not the essence of the building. Thus, Cendoya copied the Court of the Lions but not how it is approached and traversed, and even altered its proportions, reducing the number of arches. This is a Mannerist Orientalism, fed by a fascination with the mystery and legend of the Alhambra itself in a sense that has nothing to do with what the writers of the Manifesto of the Alhambra sought when they stated, "We did not come to praise copying the Alhambra; we came for the opposite."15

While the taste for the exotic and Orientalism led Europe to look to the East, both near and far, in Spain this attention was directed at its own history, which possessed stunning "Oriental" examples including the Alhambra and the Great Mosque of Cordoba—but also examples of relative "orientality." This architecture was as Hispanic as the Escorial. It had indeed come from the East, in the eighth century, but as the Barbarians had come from the north only six centuries later, the two strains were perfectly merged, producing something outstanding and unique from that combination—what Mexican architect Luis Barragán would call the "wisdom of the Spanish Moors."16

That architecture was indigenous, as evidenced by the fact that in the sixteenth century, after the expulsion of the Moors at the end of the fifteenth century, the Palace of Charles V was built within the Alhambra complex—its residents recognizing the Alhambra as genuine Spanish architecture. The architects did not build on top of it, nor near it, nor far away from it, but rather they joined the new volume with the existing one in a continuous whole, as a tribute or an acknowledgment of the dynamics of the previous palace. The newer building was not an addition but conceived as another part of the palace. Those gathered in Granada in 1952 were aware of this, for while "in America the Japanese is something far-fetched, Arabianism in Spain is an innate component of our culture."17 It has been Spain’s great fortune in the twentieth century to possess in its own architecture a superb example that perfectly combines tradition with the claims of aesthetics, construction, and modern society. Spanish architects had only to return to their traditional principles and allow these practices to become the soul that would warm the body of architecture.

The preface to the Manifesto of the Alhambra expresses it as follows: "We have come to realize the modern values, in a purely architectural sense, of the Alhambra. The relation between this fourteenth-century building and the most advanced architecture is, to some extent, very apparent: they coincide in the acceptance of humanistic measure; in the asymmetric but organic composition of the floor plan; in the purity and sincerity of the resulting volumes; in the way that garden and landscape are added to the building; in the economical and strict use of materials, without ornamental ‘fat,’ and in many more aspects that would take too long to list."18

The two questions raised earlier are therefore answered: Why go to the Alhambra? What did those who went there discover? Architects went to the Alhambra for the same reason that Utzon traveled to Mexico in 1966, in Wigley’s account of why architects travel: because they needed to confirm their intuitions and rehearse what they already knew. They did not actually find anything—they returned to Madrid without the text, which was written afterward. They had “remembered” many things, however: that good architecture demands humility and time to develop, never urgency; that materials should be used as they are without imitating something else or adding superfluous and banal ornaments; that symmetry was a source of great satisfaction; that diagonals significantly enriched spaces; that bare walls were rewarding; that a window was a cut in the wall and not another building; that the contrasts between light and shadow, textures, dimensions, and colors were important; that a garden and a patio should not be considered as existing only outdoors but as a substantial part of the building; that the succession of planes provides infinity and emotion to space; that the module and dimensions of a simple brick, or a Mocárabe (honeycomb work) can become the origin of all proportions; and, foremost, that architecture must serve man rather than man adapt to architecture (5–7).19

Gropius described these lessons so well that it is useful to recall his impressions of the Japanese palace here, as we consider the Alhambra Palace, its courtyards, and its gardens with water flowing through them:

The building and its immediate surroundings constitute a homogenous, integrated space composition; no static conception, no symmetry, no central focus in the plan. Space, here the only medium of artistic creation, appears to be magically floating. Most characteristic of the spirit of the conception is the path to the entrance gate of the villa... There is a decided distaste for the imposing straight avenue; instead, there is a preference for the intimate and casual but carefully planned approach which supplies surprises at every turn and leads up to the main objective in a human, natural, unimposing manner.
The spirit of the design conception, particularly that of the early part of the building, the Old Shoin, is of remarkable clarity... The modular coordination used at this period was the most subtle known, more so than that of the Egyptians, even more than that of the Greeks... all the building parts were dimensioned horizontally and vertically on a multiple of the column thickness, which varied with the sizes of the spaces and their respective spans.

The living spaces are modest in size, in keeping with the human scale. The use of movable partitions and window frames makes their proportions extremely variable. The accentuated emptiness of the rooms with their subdued walls is a deliberately intended factor of design; its purpose is to put the emphasis on the human figure and support it with a sympathetic background. As in most Japanese creations, we find a predilection for clear contrasts: against the austere purity of the architectural frame, the spontaneous, sketchlike painting and the wealth of magnificent garments; against the light, transparent house construction, the heavy, sculptural roof. The use of contrasting materials which enhance each other in their effectiveness had been developed early, and nowhere does one find an attempt at "matching" by identical forms and colors (one of the American preoccupations), but always great care in complementing, relating, and counter-balancing. Man's oneness with nature is expressed by the use of materials left in their natural colors and by a love of the deliberately unfinished detail, corresponding to the irregularities in nature. For only the incomplete was considered to still be part of the fluid process of life; symmetry, the symbol of perfection, was reserved for the temple. The aesthetic effect is a pure, architectonic one, achieved by simple contrasts of bright and dark, smooth and rough and by juxtaposition of plain squares, rectangles, and stripes. However, none of these means are aesthetic abstractions; they are all meaningful realities, related to daily life. The builder subordinated himself and his work to the supraindividual idea of a unified environment and thereby avoided the traps of vanity, the nouvellement and the stunt. This is the lofty abode of man in equilibrium, in serenity.20

There is no record of Gropius ever having visited the Alhambra, but his description of the aesthetic and tectonic characteristics of the Katsura Palace are also valid for the Grenadian palace. Both works were also altered over time (6). While the Alhambra has not been rebuilt a number of times as Katsura has, following the same construction, the Alhambra has been substantially remade over time since the durability of its materials have necessitated repairs and reconstructions of elements. Like the ship of Theseus, it remains the same. Carlos Jiménez has noted, "The Alhambra is not an escape from the world but a complex spatial sequence revealing paradise, or the one our short stay on earth can be able to build... Traveling
around the Alhambra I discovered that architecture is a perpetual multipli-
cation that never ends since it is woven with a subtle needle sewing water,
light, and shadow with memory.²¹

Water, light, and shadow, then, remind us of the gardens of the
Alhambra—moving and fascinating elements in which the "Spanish Katsura"
also matches the Japanese version. But for the discussion at hand they are
a seductive diversion, no less so for the Spanish architects considering
the Alhambra in 1952. The reflecting pools would seduce them as much
as they seduced Barragán, who would return to them throughout his career:
"From one space to the next one goes, from one discovery to the next, as in
the courtyards of the Alhambra, so influential upon me."²²

Last but not least, a significant idea that allows us to understand
the powerful appeal of the Alhambra and its vitalizing effect comes from
architectural historian G. E. Kidder Smith's sound intuition that there were
two "Spains," stumbling upon the first outcome of what we might call the

³° Yasunari Ishimoto, photograph of carriage stop, Katsura Imperial Villa.

"spirit of the Alhambra" at the beginning of the 1960s.²³ He discerned a
balance between two contradictory forces, what he called the "endemic
contrasting tensions in Spain," that he would ironically identify in the op-
position between Gaudi's more sensual shapes and the minimalist essence of
Ibiza's architecture, and that became one in the Alhambra. It is frequently
portrayed as the zenith of Hispano-Arabic architecture: "The Alhambra
palace represents the culminating point of seven centuries of culture.²⁴
Africa and Europe coexist within its walls with an intensity that is unlikely
to be found anywhere else in the world—an extraordinary combination of
sense and sensibility.

This is the strength of the Alhambra, and will continue to be its
strength. In an interview in the 1970s, Barragán asserted: "The Arab
palaces may be five or six hundred years old, but their architecture has
no epoch; it cannot be classified, it cannot be labeled. That interests me
greatly, the idea that architecture loses its epoch in order to allow you
to live; it does not locate you or encase you, it does not confine you to the
time you are living in. You can also live the past, and along with these two
times you can also live the future."²⁵

Thus, the soul of the Alhambra was fully present at the beginning of
the Spain's architectural rebirth in the twentieth century, when the country
recuperated its plenitude of Hispano-Arabic architecture. The Manifesto
of the Alhambra was, therefore, only the written statement of a vitally critical
attitude. That is why it should be compulsory for an architect to visit the
Alhambra (or Katsura, if it is closer), but he or she should do it alone and
slowly, "without the clumsy steps of the aggressive touristic masses that
want to watch everything but end up seeing nothing."²⁶ Only then could
the architect repeat the experience Barragán recalled in his 1980 Pritzker
Prize acceptance speech when he explained:

The unexpected discovery of these "jewels" gave me a sensation
similar to the one experienced when, having walked through a dark
and narrow tunnel of the Alhambra, I suddenly emerged into the
serene, silent and solitary "Patio of the Myrtles" hidden in the entrails
of that ancient palace. Somehow I had the feeling that it enclosed
what a perfect garden no matter its size should enclose: nothing less
than the entire Universe. This memorable epiphany has always been
with me, and it is not by mere chance that from the first garden
for which I am responsible all those following are attempts to capture
the echo of the immense lesson to be derived from the aesthetic
wisdom of the Spanish Moors.²⁷
This lesson has borne much fruit throughout the twentieth century, within Spain and beyond its borders, and continues to reverberate in successive generations of young architects. It should not be lost to the noise, the rush, or the eagerness for fame that agitates modern architectural creation, or, as Walter Gropius had warned, to "vanity, nouveauté, and deceit."

Unless otherwise indicated, English translations are by the author.


6 Fernando Chueca Goitia, Manifiesto de la Alhambra (Madrid: Dirección General de Arquitectura, Ministerio de la Gobernación, 1959). While the Manifesto is portrayed as a group effort, Fernando Chueca Goitia was in reality the author of the final document. Attention must be paid to the "Critical Sessions," meetings during which the production of the manifesto was discussed. Many of those present disagreed with the writing of it, but many other contemporary architects that did not attend shared the architectural values represented by the Alhambra. A recent example is the architect José Luis López Zanón, who has attributed decisions in his design for the Universidad Laboral de Cáceres, citing his "fondness for scarcely illuminated spaces leading into other spaces with abundant light, which is the old theme of the Alhambra." This remark was made at a conference held at Escuela de Arquitectura, Universidad de Navarra in November 2012.

7 Chueca, Manifiesto de la Alhambra, 5.

8 The Critical Sessions were discussion meetings promoted by Carlos de Miguel, who assembled the most outstanding architects of the time to debate issues pertaining to the progress of the discipline of architecture, usually starting with the critique of a recently constructed building. The debates were later published in the national architecture magazine, Revista Nacional de Arquitectura.


11 Chueca, Manifiesto de la Alhambra, 24.

12 Chueca, Manifiesto de la Alhambra, 24.


14 See Juan Calatrava, "La Alhambra y el orientalismo arquitectónico," in El manifiesto de la Alhambra: 50 años después, 12–49.

15 Chueca, Manifiesto de la Alhambra, 24.

16 Luis Barragán, Pritzker Prize acceptance speech (Dumbarton Oaks, 3 June 1980); reprinted in Luis Barragán, escritos y conversaciones (Madrid: El Croquis, 2000), 60.

17 Chueca, Manifiesto de la Alhambra, 17.

18 Ibid., 14.

19 Ibid., 14.


24 Rafael Contreras, Estudio descriptivo de los monumentos árabes de Granada, Sevilla y Córdoba (1878), cited in Juan Calatrava, "La Alhambra y el orientalismo arquitectónico," 64.

25 Luis Barragán, interview by Elena Poniatowska (November–December, 1976), reprinted in Luis Barragán, escritos y conversaciones, 110.

26 Jiménez, "Recintos de agua, luz y sombra," 239.

27 Barragán, Pritzker Prize acceptance speech, 60.