



The Dissolution of Limits Through Photography. Transparency Strategies in the Work of Alejandro de la Sota and Alberto Campo Baeza

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Abstract. Since its beginning, photography has been one of the great allies of architecture. As a representation element, it manages to capture the architectural scene in fractions of a second. Its appearance as a technology available to the general public coincided with that of the Modern Movement in architecture, a Movement with which it became intimate and quickly allied itself. This new architecture, among other values, advocated lightness and transparency as values of modernity and photography attempted to reflect them. In Spain, without a doubt, Alejandro de la Sota has been one of the precursors of a mature Modern Movement. De la Sota took transparency as his banner in his latest works and this witness was taken up by one of his most notable students, Alberto Campo Baeza. This article aims to make an analysis of this architectural concept through the thoughts of its authors and especially the photographic series of several of their most paradigmatic works.

Keywords: Photography · architecture · lightness · transparency · modernity

1 Introduction

In recent years, photography has gained important prominence as a means of expression of architecture. Although initially its use focused on the representation of the executed work, the wide dissemination of this means of representation and the new technological tools allow it to participate in the construction processes and even in architecture in the project and ideation phase. No one understands a means of disseminating architecture without photographs, nor can an architecture competition be understood without three-dimensional visualizations, which are nothing more than a mixture of digital photographs and perspectives of the object to be built.

This degree of involvement between architecture and photography was already present in the early stages of modern architecture, just remember that photography was

part of the teaching in the first Bauhaus school. Without a doubt, it will be the couple László and Lucia Moholy who stood out in this matter at this time (Fig. 1) [1].

Among the values that this new architecture advocated were volume instead of mass, regularity instead of symmetry, and the prohibition of applied decoration [2]. Premises that the Swiss architect Le Corbusier translated into his well-known 5 points; the use of *pilotis*, garden terraces, open floor plan, the *fenêtre en longueur*, and free façade.

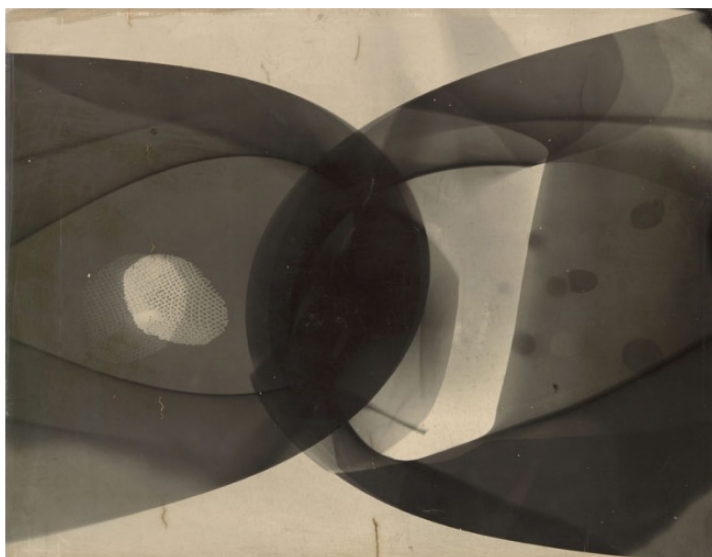


Fig. 1. Moholy-Nagy, L. 1941. Photogram. Available at: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/laszlo-moholy-nagy-photogram-1>. (Accessed: September 18, 2023)

Modernity in 1926, the year in which Le Corbusier published his 5 points, evolved at the same speed as technology; and the *fenêtre en longueur* or horizontal window, and the free façade, were added as a single constructive unit in some of his works by means of authentic glass planes. The Cité de Refuge (1929) was an example of this concept. Years before, *Mies van der Rohe* had already expressed this desire for transparency and reflections through his project for glass skyscrapers for Friedrichstrasse (1922). Anticipating with this proposal, several of the great icons of architecture that the German architect would design, taking this concept to the extreme. These new interior-exterior relationships have generated new ways of drawing, already investigated in specialized magazines [3].

In Spain, although all these issues were incorporated late, we live in an intense and fruitful modernity. Architects such as Sáenz de Oiza, Fernando Moreno Barberá and Ramón Vázquez Molezún were some of its greatest exponents. Among them, Alejandro de las Sota stood out for the consistency of his speech and his works. As other masters would do, his works evolved from brick to glass wall, from chemical to physical construction. Similarly, his drawing dematerialized at the same rate as the facades of his buildings [4]. In recent years, the relationship between photography and architecture,

during the Modern Movement, has been widely studied by the research group, FAME, acronym for Architecture Photography of the Modern Movement in Spain. Part of the results of this working group are two catalogs of exhibitions held at the Museum of the Official Credit Institute [5, 6], as well as an anthology of texts [7].

In the present moment, Alberto Campo Baeza, following the teachings of Alejandro de la Sota, has managed to materialize the wishes of his teachers. And not only that, but it highlights them thanks to the contribution of magnificent photographers¹.

2 Discussion

In his professional maturity, Alejandro de la Sota carried out several proposals that emphasized this desired transparency. Among all the works of this stage, two competitions stand out: the Office Building for Bankunion (1970) and the New Headquarters for Aviaco (1975). Both with a high component of experimentation and clear Miesian inspiration, and finally a built work, the Casa Guzmán (1975).

From the first two cases, at a graphic level, suggestive perspectives are preserved that emphasize the nudity and transparency of their enclosures, but if we focus on photographic issues, we can only find images of the models, these are unbuilt projects.

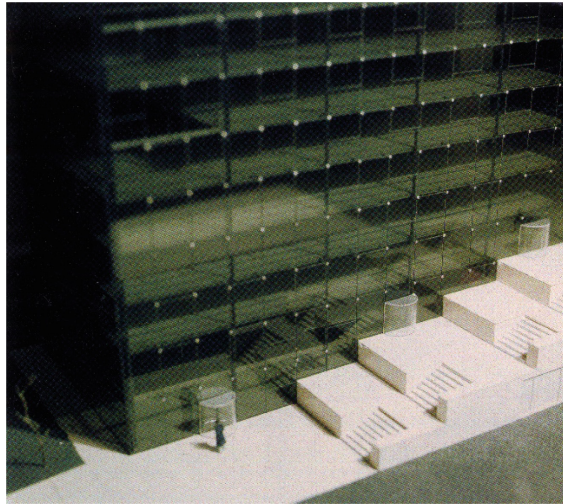


Fig. 2. Detail of the model of the Bankunion Office, 1970. Source: Abalos, I., Llinas, P., Puente, M, Madrid 2009. Alejandro de la Sota. *Archi/themes*, no. 28.

In both cases, de la Sota emphasizes the vitreous condition. Regarding Bankunion, the project report emphasizes “The building is all transparent. Within it there is activity that follows the peace of the external environment; Outside there is external life that

¹ On this question I have always defended that a bad architect with a good photographer is a hypocrite, and a good architect with a bad photographer is an idiot.” (El Mundo, 3.5.2015).

participates from within.” (Fig. 2). About the new Aviaco headquarters in the project report he repeats “the cube requires a structure that responds to the crystal concept. ...Lightness was always linked to spirituality, to poetry.”

Returning to Bankunion and the 4 images of this project in the Alejandro de la Sota Foundation. This condition of boundary dissolution is emphasized through different strategies.



Fig. 3. Detail of the model of the Bankunion Office, 1970 Source: Abalos, I., Llinas, P., Puente, M, Madrid 2009. Alejandro de la Sota. *Archi/themes*, no. 28.

Of the 4 images, 3 are exterior and show the relationship of the building with the environment. The photographic strategy regarding the composition consists of partial views of the building, to avoid being excessively descriptive and bring the vision of the model closer to that of the real project. Regarding lighting, the backlighting of the bottom of the box is favored, generating an illuminated background that increases the sensation of transparency. Likewise, the illumination of one of the facades is sought, forcing its reflection (Fig. 3).

About the case of the new Aviaco headquarters. Although it is a light project in its general conception, de la Sota opted for a translucent image for almost the entire rest of the façade, concentrating the maximum transparency of his work on the ground floor. In the images that exist of this building, highlight the frontal view of the access, where the transparency, the sign and the human scale through the staircase stand out (Fig. 4). In this case, the material consistency of the form does lead him to reproduce a general vision of the building through a photographic image, as if it were an axonometry (Fig. 4).

To generate this sensation, a frontal view of detail is sought where the building gains depth in the only point where it can do so, the ground floor.

In addition to these two unbuilt proposals by de la Sota, we want to highlight one of his domestic “experiments.” The house for Mr. Guzmán (1975), a project that generates confusion not because of the nakedness of its facades but because of their depth. De la

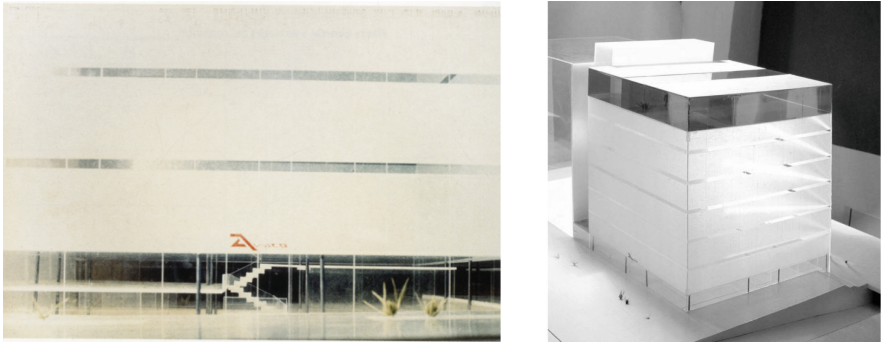


Fig. 4. Front view of the ground floor of the Aviaco Headquarters, 1975. Aerial View of the mock-up for the new headquarters of Aviaco, 1975. Source: Abalos, I., Llinas, P., Bridge, M., Madrid 2009. Alejandro de la Sota. *Arqui/temas*, no. 28.)

Sota breaks down the façade and the roof into different layers and projects them to the outside, generating several intermediate spaces. The glass, the sliding slats, the awnings, nature, all of this in the service of dissolving the limit of the home, in this case not by compression of the construction element but by expansion.

Again, his words are illuminating. “The good thing about today is that we can have an open, open house that closes; It seems like it’s nonsense, but it’s true, that’s the great news. Be inside your house and let the garden penetrate it, so that you do not step on a line when passing from inside to outside” [8].

Regarding this house, the amount of photographic material is much greater, but we will only cite a series of photographs that we find illuminating and that reflect this situation of dissolution in layers. These are the images taken by photographer José Hevia (Fig. 5). It expresses the movement of the various layers that make up the skin. They are images that are read in series, and one cannot be understood without the other, as if they were frames from a film. The photographer captures the moment before and after, and acts as a faithful notary of the changes that occur.

Regarding Alberto Campo Baeza, the architect was not only a student of de la Sota but has also several writings about him. His architectural thinking therefore maintains common roots.

Regarding transparency, without a doubt the Consultative Council of Castilla y León in Zamora is one of its greatest exponents. The extra-clear crystals together with the glass ribs make this project an example of transparency and lightness. The point of view chosen by the photographer, the masterful Javier Callejas², is frontal, directly facing the transparency of the skin; or almost tangent, demonstrating its extreme thinness (Fig. 6). The side view even directly reminds us of some of D. Alejandro’s famous drawings for the Bankunion headquarters. The premeditated reflections slightly materialize the glass skin. Javier Callejas, regular photographer of Alberto Campo’s works, undoubtedly masters the essential theme of the architect’s work, light as the protagonist.

² You can follow his work on his Instagram account <https://www.instagram.com/javiercallejas> and his website <https://www.javiercallejas.com/>.



Fig. 5. Hevia, J. 2009. Guzman House. Source: Abalos, I., Llinas, P., Puente, M, Madrid 2009. Alejandro de la Sota. *Archi/themes*, nº 28.

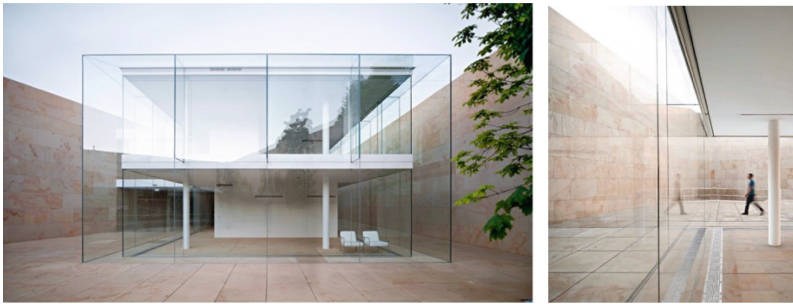


Fig. 6. Callejas, J. 2012. Consejo Consultivo de Castilla y León, Zamora. Alberto Campo Baeza. Available in <https://www.campobaeza.com> (Accessed: September 18, 2023)

The second of the projects that establishes a direct dialogue with the teachings of Alejandro de la Sota is the Sports Pavilion in Madrid. It is a glass piece that recalls some strategies used in the competition for the new Aviaco headquarters (Fig. 4).

This accessed room is configured as a parallelepipedal, translucent piece that, when it meets the ground, presents a large horizontal window that relates it to an adjacent plaza (Fig. 7). The interior photograph immortalizes black characters on a white background (Fig. 7) as if it were one of Alejandro de la Sota's drawings. There are no shadows or direct light. A suitable day and solar moment is sought. The vision of the box is incomplete, frontal.

The window where it meets the ground provides horizontal vision and breaks the monotony and neutrality of the GRC panels. Diffused light floods the space.



Fig. 7. Callejas, J. 2017. Sports pavilion in Madrid. Available at <https://www.campobaeza.com> (Consulted: September 18, 2023)

3 Conclusions

Lightness, being inside or outside, not stepping on the line as Alejandro de la Sota said. Small nuances that make the work of architecture transcend that of a mere construction.

This article presents architectural strategies of two of the great masters of Spanish architecture, and how they used them to achieve the dissolution of the limits of their architectural works. These concepts, these ideas are transmitted in this case not through traditional graphic expression, but through the graphic representation that is achieved with light, photography.

Photography, owner of its own rules as elements of expression of architecture, changes the traditional shading of drawings for shadows, the thickness of the lines for textures. Photography thus becomes a very suitable tool to transmit concepts not only of the built work but even of the projected work.

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