

100 YEARS WITH **ALEJANDRO DE LA SOTA**

CENTRO GALEGO DE ARTE CONTEMPORÁNEA
Santiago de Compostela

Curated by Moisés Puente

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FUNDACIÓN ALEJANDRO DE LA SOTA

ALEJANDRO DE LA SOTA, OR THE CONSTRUCTION OF A MITH

Alejandro de la Sota (Pontevedra, Spain, 1913 - Madrid, Spain, 1996) probably arouses more impassioned responses than any other modern Spanish architect. His work is the subject of pilgrimages by architects and students looking for a unique way of working, an encounter with an almost magical revelation. And his words resonate as mantras that are endlessly repeated in the architecture schools. That said, behind the construction of his myth is a clearly defined and structured programme, responsibility for which lies not only with De la Sota himself but also with the so-called *escuela sotiana*, the school of disciples whose unambiguous reading of his work ended up straitjacketing his personality. Why has there been this insistent attempt to construct a myth of modern Spanish architecture? Why has it been Alejandro de la Sota, and not one of the other modern masters, who has been wrapped in this almost mystical aura?

2013 is the one hundredth anniversary of Alejandro de la Sota's birth. Like all commemorations, this anniversary is the perfect excuse to recall and reprise the man, his work, his teaching and, perhaps most relevant of all, the currency of his legacy. Any fresh look at the past should be a redemptive look that brings part of that past closer to a present that serves as a sounding board.

1. After completing his schooling in Pontevedra Alejandro de la Sota enrolled in the Faculty of Mathematics at the University of Santiago de Compostela (by then an essential prerequisite for going on to study architecture). When he arrived in Madrid to begin his higher education, the School of Architecture there was caught up in the uncertain times between the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera and the establishment of the Second Republic. After interrupting his studies to take part in the Spanish Civil War, Alejandro de la Sota graduated as an architect in 1941.

In October of that year he started working as an architect with the Institute National de Colonización (INC), a position he left after a few years to work with other architects of this generation. After a few early commissions for small construction projects in his native Galicia and various interior reform schemes, his first major works combined influences deriving from the vogue for popular architectural styles with timid approaches to modernity. In the mid nineteen-fifties, with his career as an architect already on a sure

footing, he built several villages for the INC in Andalusia, Catalonia and Extremadura, of note among these being the village of Esquivel (Seville, 1952-1963) and the satellite town of Fuencarral-B (Madrid, 1955-1956), essentially exercised in the popular style in line with what was being done all over Spain at the time, but with a distinctive emphasis on abstraction. It was also at this time that he tested out other architectural languages, ranging from the expressionism of the since-demolished Arvesú house (Madrid, 1953-1955) to a form of neoplasticism for the Cámara Sindical Agraria de Pontevedra in the Casa de Campo park (Madrid, 1956) and the Italian-influenced exercises of the houses in Zamora (1956-1957).

However, and this is something that has gone unremarked by most of those who have studied his work, from the beginning of his career as an architect De la Sota had a theoretical agenda; an agenda he pursued, in its first stage, by submitting articles to the general and specialist press on a more or less regular basis. With a body of built work very much in line with what was being done in the post-war Spain of those years, the publication of his works (which were featured in various issues of the *Revista Nacional de Arquitectura* of the time) and his writings enabled him to position himself on the cultural scene, both in Madrid and nationally, and embark on a defence of the modern that was to become increasingly stalwart. I would seem that at this early stage his texts took the same paths as his built work, evincing a typical youthful eagerness to try out different themes and the learning experience of this exposure to public debates and invitations to contribute to the leading Spanish magazines of the time.

In his writings from that time, one can sense a bold championing of modernity and of an ethically committed attitude that would soon thereafter manifest itself in one of the key moments of his career. In



Alejandro de la Sota: Arvesú house. Madrid, 1953-1955.
Courtesy of the Alejandro de la Sota Foundation



Alejandro de la Sota: Maravillas School Gymnasium. Madrid, 1960-1962. Courtesy of the Alejandro de la Sota Foundation

1955, with a promising career ahead of him, Alejandro de la Sota made the decision to stop working for a few years in order to think about what path he ought to take. It was then that he decided, 'to opt for a physical as opposed to a chemical architecture, in which no element is mixed with another to produce a third, but [one in which] with the tweezers you can always come up with the whole personality of the element.'

2. During this voluntarily inactive period, Alejandro de la Sota discovered, among other things, the lightness of American construction, dry assembly, industrialized building and the very lightweight mechanisms for producing shade, and all of it from European architects who had emigrated to the United States: primarily Marcel Breuer, Walter Gropius and Richard Neutra, without forgetting the ubiquitous presence of the American work of Mies van der Rohe. His references ceased to be local—he moved on from craft skills with lime and mortar, the exquisite manual processes and finishing of the heavy, preindustrial 'chemical' architecture, which merely drags after it the accumulated legacy of history. The new goal was to return to the avant-garde spirit of the Modern Movement, to take his place on the international stage and leave behind the sad blandness of the architecture of the Franco regime.

In this new phase he built the TABSA aeronautical workshops (Madrid, 1956-1958), a perfect example of industrial architecture with a superb handling of natural light through the sawtooth roof. Shortly after, in collaboration with José Antonio Corrales and Ramón Vázquez Molezún, he completed the children's summer-camp residence of Miraflores de la Sierra (Madrid, 1957-1959), which is basically a huge inclined roof parallel to the natural slope of the terrain. After the preliminary work of laying down a new artificial floor, the scheme materialized in two separate physical

worlds, one cavernous—the vase of untreated stone and the other aerial—the roof resting on slender pillars, independent of the vertical skin—with the whole inserted brilliantly in a landscape that, as announced in previous texts, penetrates the building without the intervention of formalistic devices.

However, though he had already established his reputation as a serious architect, it was at this time that he constructed the two buildings—the Civil Governor's Office and Residence in Tarragona and the Maravillas school gymnasium—that would undoubtedly consolidate Alejandro de la Sota as one of the most important figures in the Spanish architecture of the second half of the twentieth century, and also set a standard his later works found it hard to surpass: a standard that may be responsible for creating the De la Sota myth and to some extent straitjacketing the man and his work.

Although these two schemes were simultaneously present on his drawing board, they almost seem to be the work of two different architects. In the Civil Governor's Office and Residence in Tarragona (1957-1964) the volumetric displacement of a mixed programme is reminiscent of the spatial exercises we find in Paul Klee or in the Italian rationalism of Giuseppe Terragni in pursuit of a perfect modern type, in a canon that has been perpetuated over the decades in the imaginary of Spanish architects. The ironic play with materials emulated, using craft techniques, what the Spanish construction industry was at that time incapable of producing: the smoothness of stone cladding or cast metal railings (those on the main stair were handmade by a highly skilled craftsman in imitation of industrialized sections).

In contrast, and with completely different project processes, the Maravillas school gymnasium (Madrid, 1960-1962) is not interested in being a perfect model of modern orthodoxy, but

seeks instead to respond to a very specific situation, though in so doing it uses modern logics: the logical outlining of the problems leads to a clear result, almost the only one possible. The bravado display of technical skill and inventiveness here takes the teachings of modernity to bold extremes yet with no need to construct a prototype.

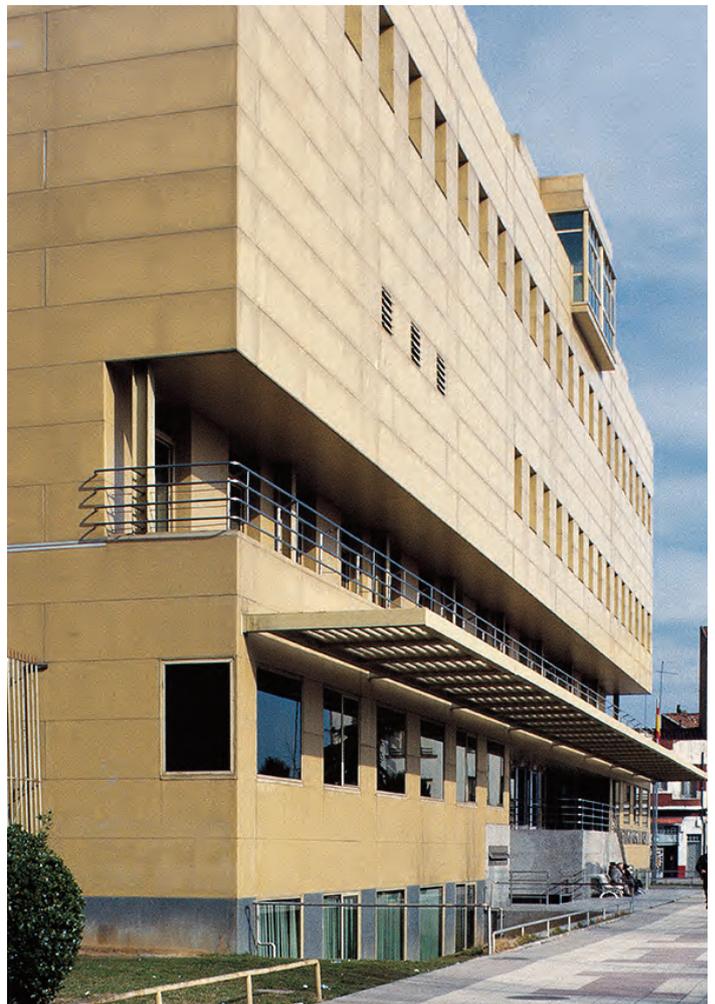
Meanwhile, in parallel with the construction of these works, he continued to publish short texts in magazines, not now as essays of themes to be explored, but with a conscious sense of speaking from the position of a master, an awareness that his work has reached maturity and an all but indisputable status. At this time he wrote texts on the work of Eduardo Chillida, obituaries of Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier, and advice to architecture students, and immediately went on to posit the use of technological advances as the only way for architecture to progress. During the nineteen-sixties, when he was engaged in building his most uncompromisingly 'hard' works, which rehearsed new formats based on heavy prefabricated elements whose constructional logic seemed to overshadow his own qualities as a designer, De la Sota was definitively constructing his own character from his isolated position, as a researcher of various technologies and an inventor of gadgets, in similar fashion to what his much-admired Jean Prouvé was then doing. The ease with which he established almost magical effects with the materials, using them in unexpected situations—the lightness of a seemingly 'heavy' cladding in the Civil Governor's Office and Residence in Tarragona or the housing on Calle Prior in Salamanca, or the inverted truss of the Maravillas school gymnasium—consolidated his reputation as an exceptional handler of materials and skilled designer dedicated not to the application of impeccable systems of composition, as his master Mies van der Rohe might do, but to a search for almost perverse relationships between the materials and their *mise en scène*, all informed by the application of a *sui generis* logic that has a great deal to do with all he had learned from popular architecture in the earlier period.

In the late nineteen-sixties, while continuing to champion the technology of prefabrication, De la Sota published one of his classic texts, 'The Great and Honourable Orphanhood,' in which he inveighed against the excessive erudition of the new architectural languages and 'the terrible diversification of petty little efforts with such great results in pettiness and littleness,' in a clear reaction against the new currents were entering the School of Architecture in Madrid. It is worth recalling that two of the seminal texts that gave rise to postmodern architecture had appeared just a few years earlier, in 1966: Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, and Aldo Rossi's *Architettura della Città*.

3. In 1970, Alejandro de la Sota presented for the chair in Elements of Composition at the School of Architecture of Madrid with an unorthodox and loosely structured thesis, in which he set out his own way of approaching teaching without relying on academic apparatus: 'Teaching implies a transmission of explicit principles from the teacher to the student; if in the former there is

a congruence between work and thought, this transfer comes about naturally.' De la Sota failed to obtain the professorship—the other candidates were prestigious scholars—and his words failed to resonate in a politicized school which favoured teaching that was 'exorbitantly developed, achieving an unbalanced brilliance of this over authentic truth in work and thought.' The Madrid School of Architecture thereby lost one of the great master architects. This setback, coupled with his failure to win a major architectural competition that year—for an unusually advanced office building using glass technologies that had never before been tested in Spain (the Bankuni6n headquarters, Madrid, 1970)—led De la Sota to shut himself in his studio on calle Bret6n de los Herreros, having decided never to set foot in the Madrid School of Architecture or have anything to do with the specialist press.

A few years later, in 1974, Mariano Bay6n published an interview entitled 'Conversation with Alejandro de la Sota from his House Arrest,' which effectively consolidated his mythic status in Spanish architecture. From his 'house arrest,' De la Sota championed a non-architectonic architecture, an architecture far removed from any disciplinary culture, a self-enclosed architecture. Later that same year the magazine *Hogar y Arquitectura* published an issue almost entirely devoted to his career (an eighty-page dossier by Miguel 1ngel Badellou); at the same time the magazine *Nueva Forma*, edited by Juan Daniel Fullaondo, devoted a whole issue to his work,

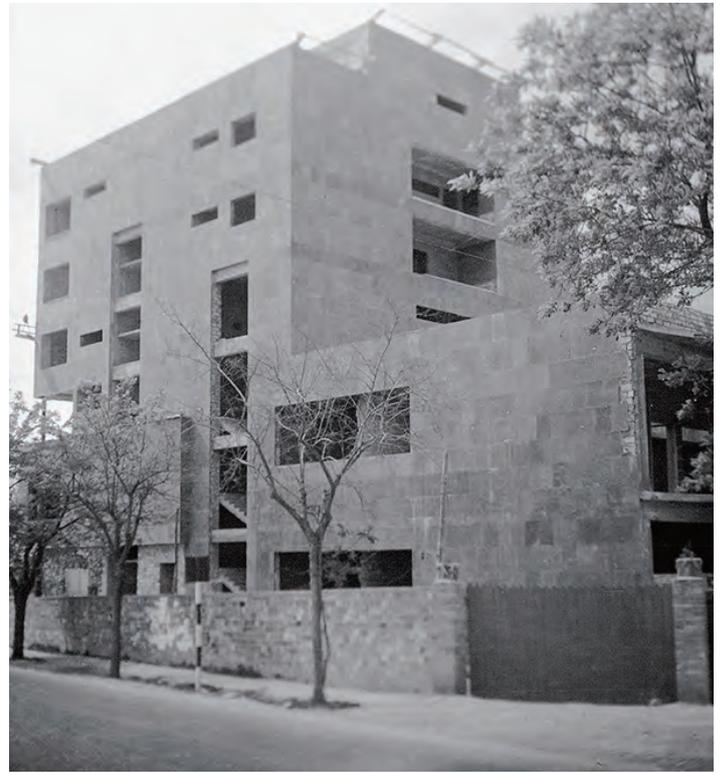


Alejandro de la Sota: Post and Telecommunication Building. León, 1981-1984. Courtesy of the Alejandro de la Sota Foundation

and the following year saw the first monograph study, in the small-format collection *Artistas españoles contemporáneos*, also written by Baldellou. This was followed in due course by almost exclusively devoted issues of the magazines of the country's two leading architects' associations: *Arquitectura*, published in Madrid, and Catalan-based magazine *Quaderns d'Arquitectura i Urbanisme*.

It was in the latter that he published one of his most important writings in 1982—'For a Logical Architecture,' in which he aligned himself with modern positions against the attacks of postmodern revisionism and upheld a logical and still modern way of doing architecture. It was at this time that De la Sota radicalized his modern positions, in an apparently autistic purge radically distant from the moderns with a critique of the ideological positions of the ideological throwing into crisis of modernity.

Meanwhile his work had shifted from using the heavy prefabricated elements of the nineteen-sixties—as in the Bahía Bella tourist complex (Mar Menor, Murcia, 1964-1966) or the Varela House (Villalba, Madrid 1964-1968)—to lightweight sheet metal façades, first used in the Caja Postal data centre in Madrid (1972-1977) and subsequently in the Domínguez House (A Caeira, Pontevedra, 1973-1978) and the Post and Telecommunications building (León, 1981-1984). In this last he placed the sheet metal plates in a horizontal stretcher bond to emulate huge stone blocks, turned in at the windows to form deep interior recesses that create the illusion of thick load-bearing walls. By infusing nobility into a humble material such as Robertson sheeting, by way of perverse games of almost pop affiliation, Alejandro de la Sota went a step further in his enthusiasm for construction processes using lightweight materials by adding the concept of 'easiness.' If the project instruments are not revealed other than through the resolution of problems, neither



Alejandro de la Sota: Civil Governor's Office and Residence. Tarragona, 1957-1964. Courtesy of the Alejandro de la Sota Foundation

are efforts and the work of the architect or the people who construct his buildings.

De la Sota boasted that his buildings could be put up and taken down with a screwdriver, and that on his construction sites 'the workers didn't sweat,' and this (almost aristocratic) affirmation of effortless work, of liberation from manual labour, of craft processes (which he had rejected as early as the nineteen-fifties), gave the architect's last works something of the character of playful artefacts, light, easy, almost laughable.

4. Interestingly, and in parallel with the construction of this personality apparently alien to the Spanish architectural scene, Alejandro de la Sota is still today the most widely published and best-published modern Spanish architect.

And yet, though we know more and more about his character and his work—something that would seem to go against his prized aura—Alejandro de la Sota has lost none of his charisma. The mythic figure of the architect with a firm ethical stance in relation to the profession and a logical, direct discourse goes hand and hand in one of the most intense and consistent careers in the recent history of Spanish architecture. Although our circumstances are very different from his, his legacy is still there, ready to be used. Any reading of his work we attempt today will necessarily entail updating him, and perhaps demystifying him, as we embrace and make our own his singular way of making the architecture that, as he argued, should be written with a lower-case *a*.



Alejandro de la Sota: village of Esquivel. Seville, 1952-1963. Courtesy of the Alejandro de la Sota Foundation

Excerpt from 'Alejandro de la Sota, or the Construction of a Myth,' an essay by Moisés Puente, published in Carlos Asensio-Wandosell and Moisés Puente (eds.), *Fisac / De la Sota*, La Fábrica and Fundación ICO, Madrid, 2013.

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