Fernando Chueca Goitia and others  
The Alhambra Manifesto  
(1953)  

Translated by Jacob Moore  

Word Count: 2,171  


We, the signers of this Manifesto, do not want to be pure iconoclasts, for we are already too weary of such abrupt and arbitrary turns. So people will say: “Why the need for a Manifesto, a term which, almost by definition, implies a text that is dogmatic and revolutionary, one that breaks from the past, a public declaration of a new credo?” Simply put, because reality, whose unequivocal signs leave no room for doubt, is showing us that the ultimate traditionalist posture, which architecture adopted after the war of Liberation, can already no longer be sustained and its tenets are beginning to fall apart. […]

Today the moment of historical resurrections has passed. There is no use denying it; just as one cannot deny the existence of the Renaissance in its time or that of the nineteenth century archaeological revivals. The arts have tired of hackneyed academic models and of cold, lifeless copies, and seek new avenues of expression that, though lacking the perfection of those that are known, are more radical and authentic. But one must also not forget that the peculiar conditions implicit in all that is Spanish require that, within the global historical movement, we move forward, we would not say with a certain prudence, but yes, adjusting realities in our own way. Nor can we launch ourselves into an internationalism entirely deprived of its own roots, first and foremost because we are still in a period of national recovery, and the crisis into which we were thrown by 1898 has not yet run its course. Though we do not want to defend the notion of a nationalist culture, we cannot forget that architecture depends on realities that are very much connected to the land and from which it cannot remove itself, as do the hard sciences in their search for a universally valid truth. Spain is a country of undeniable temperamental and cultural geographical peculiarities. What the last few years of our artistic history tell us is that above all prevails the desire to find ourselves. […]

In this situation, or state of awareness, a symptomatic event has occurred, which at first seems almost paradoxical: a few Spanish architects have begun to feel attracted in a very special way to the artistic merits of the Alhambra de Granada. It is not that here and there some were, to a greater or lesser extent, won over by its imponderable beauty; it is that, little by little, they began to contemplate it with an entirely new set of eyes. These new eyes have been, radically and specifically, an architect’s eyes. The focus and value of the Alhambra has changed quadrant.
The Alhambra is a monument that no one has looked at from an architect’s perspective; it is strange: we believe this is true even for the same architects whose professional gaze was aroused, so to speak, by El Escorial, and who, when they arrived at the Alhambra loosened their pliable perspicacity to become so many more curious tourists, even excusing their complacency by clearly delineating the nature of their emotions: “Yes, I like this, but not as an architect.” This peculiar way of contemplating the Castillo Rojo derives directly from Romanticism. “What I believe to be certain,” said Garcia Gomez, “is that this vision of ours, which is more or less different, derives from that of the Romantics.”

What is extraordinary is that, things being as they are, architects, in applying their unique way of seeing to the Alhambra—a rare event—have discovered the monument to be a formidable repository of essential architecture. […] We were also saying that this event seems almost paradoxical in nature, because in the face of the modernity and simplicity that we seek, we allow ourselves to be seduced by an ancient edifice and one that has been called complicated and decadent; because while seeking to exalt noble and permanent materials, we offer up as an example a building whose dominant materials are among the most contemptible—mud, plaster, and stucco. Yes, all of this is obviously true; but it is worth us spending a little time on it, because as we shed light on this supposed contradiction, the reader will be better able to grasp the heart of what inspires our Manifesto.

We began by saying that the pure neo-stylings that characterized the development of Spanish architecture after 1898 were dominated by the superficial method of the direct copy. Perhaps because an academic tradition continued which, though more and more decrepit, had no other method than the exact and scientific copy of antiquity. When exhaustion and the arrival of new spiritual appetites caused it to change direction and veer towards other styles which, in their origin, were vital and free, the same method was applied, with an obvious contradiction: the method that we could call scientifico-archeological. Essentially imaginative architectures, free and uncontrollable, like the Plateresque and the Baroque, were copied using the same narrow and prescribed criteria with which infertile academicism was multiplying its buildings, with the help of Vignola’s checkbook. But the result was much worse, catastrophically worse. With Neoclassicism, there was the necessary congruence between style and method, and the result was, at the very least, discretion and a high average. On the other hand, in what was done later, this essential congruence was missing: it was parody mummifying living art. For us, the Alhambra is not a historical edifice, as it is for an archaeologist; nor do we want to embalm it in future constructions, as was done with the Palace of Monterrey or with Ribera’s facades. If we were to see the Alhambra this way, it would be because we would have been missing that way of seeing as an architect, to which we were alluding earlier. As a result, we are not contradicting ourselves when we come to meditate on modern architecture in the lull of the Alhambra, because for us, this building has no age: it has only architecture.

At the same time, during our days in Granada we became aware of the Alhambra’s modern—speaking in a strictly architectonic sense—qualities. The relationship between this fourteenth century building and current, more advanced architecture is, at certain points, astonishing: they coincide in their acceptance of the human unit of measure; in their symmetrical, but organic approach to their plans; in the
purity and sincerity of the resulting volumes; in the way they incorporate the garden and the landscape with the building; in the economical and strict—without cosmetic excess—use of materials, and in so many other ways that would take too long to list. […]

It is a fact that modern art, in general, is returning to purer, more remote, primitive founts, to these forgotten avenues and paths. The reincarnation of naive painting in Rousseau; the nigrismo or barbarian renaissance launched by Picasso and Lipchitz; Rouault, with his dramatic figures, which seem as if they have been extracted from a Roman sculpture or from a novice glazier, are examples of such a trend. In architecture, essential forms, like the pyramid and the mastaba, baptisteries or Romanesque towers, the buckets of whitewash that flourish in the Mediterranean, be they Latin or Islamic, are other enduring pathways which stimulate today’s architects, stirring a fresh creative impulse. An architect of the universal import of Frank Lloyd Wright does a sentimental apprenticeship in the Orient, and infuses a marked Japanese influence into North American architecture; and in America this Japanese influence is something brought in from outside, by personal or group preference, whereas the Arabic influence in Spain is, on the contrary, a constitutive part of our culture.

Nonetheless, we have not known how to comprehend the hidden possibilities of Hispano-Muslim architecture, and have limited ourselves to taking it as an object of fashion or a picturesque fancy. I am referring to the period beginning in the nineteenth century, because prior to this the entire history of our architecture cannot be understood without taking into account its Orientalism and the pertinent influence of the arts of Cordoba, Sevilla and Granada. The influence of this architecture, visible in the most remote Castillian or Andalusian convent, is a fact that demonstrates the power that emanates from the art of Al Andalus when it propagates by pure instinct. […]

Let us look at a very concrete example of a coincidence between Muslim and modern architecture: the absence of molding. […]

Molding is Greece, and Greece, in this as in many things, marks the course of Western destiny. But nevertheless, what sparse molding on the Parthenon! It is not molding per se, but the expression of the structural element revealed in small and concise contours. We are almost one step away from the poverty described by Choisy, even as we are consoled by the excellence of the line. It was those who came after who distorted the lesson of Greece and converted molding into an ornament in its own right, which had never been the case and which, pushed to a rigorist extreme, is repulsive to the dignity of the architecture. Nonetheless, Western architecture has suffered from this propensity for molding, bringing some authors to confuse the task of the architect with that of a plotter of curves and countercurves, the sharper and more refined the better. Molding is the style of man, it has been said. To transform the architect into a figure who puts molding on surfaces like frames are put on paintings seems to us excessive.

While Western art was growing tired of so much rhetorical molding, Oriental architectures with the smooth flow of their surfaces, were demonstrating, despite their apparent whimsy, a logic far superior in the formal expression of its elements. If a cymatium is placed on top of a capital of the Alhambra in the expansive shape of a scotia, it is because the surface of the capital needs to be amplified in order to support the pilasters from which the arches will originate; if stalactites breed protrusions, it is in response to another element. Even the most insignificant form never eludes the reality of its own function. […]
By the same token we could say that if there is no mystification in form or in decoration, neither is there in the use of materials. Our current appetite—as we were saying—is for noble and nobly treated materials; our horror, those that are second-rate. And then we were afraid of the mocking condemnation of those who found us spellbound by a building of mud and plaster. Yes, but a material’s nobility is not so much intrinsic as it is determined by its treatment. Calcium sulfate is not of a lower chemical or geological rank than the carbonate; what degrades it is its illegitimate use, making it look like something it is not, transforming it into a simulating paste. The feeling that a material is like paste is what gave rise to pastiche, and the worst is that when one creates models, mentally, in paste, one ends up transforming the hardest rocks into turron de Jijona [nougat from Jijona], at least in appearance.

The Alhambra represents the utmost sincerity in the use of materials and the utmost differentiation of its qualities, meaning their structural and aesthetic order. Its walls of mud are a weighty mass, deaf and mute, which sustains itself with the gravity of geological sediment; the marble and wood are its muscle, guided by active and dynamic laws; the plaster is the embroidery that dresses and adorns the body. […]

We repeat once more: we have not come to preach the copying of the Alhambra; we have come to do completely the opposite. And it is precisely because the Alhambra is not useable in an immediate sense as an architectural program that we look at it with more delectation. If you wanted, you could perfectly fit a ministry office into the plan of the Monastery of El Escorial; the Alhambra is perfectly useless for any of the functions of our modern life: an advantage, and not a small one, for those seeking creative incentives for its protection. The reintegration of El Escorial into our architecture went ahead even over suppositions of immediate utility; what we are looking for now are more subtle resonances, more hidden veins that, precisely, would save us from a new pastiche.

Let us also not forget that if architecture is a practical art, it is also a visual art; and forms, color, proportions, rhythms, cadences, spaces, atmospheres, structures, materials, are for the architect the media of expression for his visual creation. The possibilities that the Alhambra offers us in this aspect persist pure and untouched despite the exhaustion of Classico-Renaissance principles and methods and, moreover, these possibilities are now eloquent and comprehensible in the light of a new historical sensibility.

As men of today, we yearn to find the expression of our era by incorporating ourselves into the universal current of architecture; as Spaniards, sons of 1898, we need to anchor said appetites in racial ground: the key is there, in the Alhambra.