Leopoldo Torres Balbás (1888-1960) was a leader in the international movement to make preservation a cornerstone of modernization. He clarified and promoted the idea of adaptive re-use, arguing for the need to reform the museological mentality of preservation bureaucracies. Echoing Quatremère de Quincy, he denounced the treatment historic buildings as museum artifacts, believing it to be their death sentence. He saw buildings as cultural objects whose meaning and purpose was to shelter ordinary human activity. To deny them a role in contemporary culture was also to obfuscate their historic significance. The best way to preserve historic buildings, he thought, was to keep them occupied as productive parts of the economy. In “The Isolation of our Cathedrals” (1919) invoked Camillo Sitte’s lessons to sharply criticize the government’s demolition of buildings around monuments. In subsequent writings extended the argument in favor of integrating monuments into their context to also include their integration into social, cultural, financial and political realities. Torres Balbás’ theory was not so easy to implement in practice. The Spanish economy had been contracting since the Spanish American War (1898) and continued to do so until well after the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), such that during most of his life it was difficult for landlords to find solvent tenants. There was a large stock of abandoned buildings, widespread unemployment and civil unrest, and a succession of failed governments and military coup d’états. Despite this dire situation, Torres Balbás was able to graduate from the Madrid School of Architecture in 1916, and to study archaeology at the Centro de Estudios Históricos under the influential art historiographer Manuel Gomez Romero. He quickly rose to prominence as an unusually gifted young architect, historian and preservationist, and was named secretary of the prestigious official journal Arquitectura from 1918 to 1923, when he became preservation architect of the Alhambra, directing extensive restoration work there. As a participant in the 1931 Athens Conference he influenced the ensuing Charter’s focus on maintaining buildings and their objects in situ. At the outbreak of the Civil War, Franco’s administration removed him from his position, and barred him from professional work. He retained the Chair in the History of Architecture he had gained in 1931 at the Madrid School of Architecture, devoting himself to scholarship and writing, notably Ciudades Hispanomusulmanas, published posthumously in 1970. His work awakened a new postwar generation of Spanish architects to write the influential “Manifesto de la Alhambra” which proclaimed historic monuments to be essential sources of (nationalist) inspiration for modernist designs.

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