

Emilio Tuñón: About CIRCO

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# Emilio Tuñón: About *CIRCO*

## Interview by Gabriela García de Cortázar

Realized by e-mail between 11 and 13 October, 2017.

Emilio Tuñón is Professor of Architectural Projects at the Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid, ETSAM. He founded the Mansilla + Tuñón Arquitectos office in 1992, together with Luis Moreno Mansilla (1959-2012). The following year, with Luis M. Mansilla and Luis Rojo, both professors at the ETSAM as well, he formed the 'thought cooperative' *Circo*. Since then, he edits a publication of the same name, which has been awarded the III Bienal Iberoamericana de Arquitectura e Ingeniería prize, the COAM prize (Colegio Oficial de Arquitectos de Madrid) and the special FAD critics prize (Fomento de las Artes y del Diseño), all of them in Spain.

At present, Emilio Tuñón continues his architectural practice from his office Tuñón Arquitectos. In addition to teaching at ETSAM, he has been guest professor at numerous schools, amongst which are the Harvard Graduate School of Design and Princeton University's School of Architecture.

Nowadays, Tuñón edits *CIRCO* regularly together with Luis Rojo and Jesús Vassallo. In this interview, he speaks about this publication and about the work of his office, where he combines both an architectural projective and constructive practice with theory and teaching.

*In one of the first numbers of CIRCO, around 1993, Ábalos y Herreros wrote the following: "We understand that the invention of these CIRCOs is to have a forum for conversation. To construct places like this, spaces made by words, is a luxury, both mediatic and architectural". I would like to ask you about the history of this 'CIRCO-space'. How was it invented? Why was it needed?*

CIRCO began its course in January 1993, after the dissolution of the editorial team of the journal *Arquitectura*, formed, among others, by architects and professors Francisco Asís Cabrero, Federico Soriano, Fernando Porras, Iñaki Ábalos, Juan Herreros, Ricardo Sánchez Lampreave, Luis M. Mansilla and myself.

At the end of his work in *Arquitectura*, Luis M. Mansilla and myself, together with Luis Rojo, decided to start a research project that would allow establishing collaborations with other researchers, professors and architects. Thus, in 1993 we founded a thought cooperative called *CIRCO Mansilla Rojo y Tuñón Coop*, that was later called *CIRCO M.R.T. Coop*.

### Why 'circo'?

The name *CIRCO* is a direct reference to the *Circus* of Alexander Calder (1926-1931). Calder's *Circus* is formed by a set of small figures made of recycled materials, with which he used to put up shows, sharing with his friends the incredible performance of his marvellous mobile objects. Carlos Vilardebó filmed Alexander Calder's presentation of *Circus*, and today we can see this show in his film *Le Cirque de Calder*, done in 1961. Calder's *Circus* is part of the permanent collection of the Whitney Museum in Nueva York.

*CIRCO*'s first published text was '*Cuando el dedo roza, con cierta fe, lo inerte*', by Luis M. Mansilla. In this beautiful text, Luis writes about Calder's *Circus*, expressing the transformation that can be exerted on reality, on the world of inanimate objects, through creativity. For Mansilla, what's most beautiful of Calder's work, of these endearing circus figures, lies on the extension of the process of a search for balance. Motivation always has its own life, waiting for a breath: "and the awareness of its swaying, even in the distance, humanizes the object, our will breathes life into it when, with a certain faith, the finger lightly touches the inert".

*Understanding that the 'circo' came from this material object, what is the space of your CIRCO like, understanding 'space' in a metaphorical way?*

The main objective of *CIRCO* is the widening of the *research playground* within architecture, by the critical incorporation of the concepts, thoughts and links that allow for an enrichment of the theoretical discourse, teaching and professional practice. In this world in continuous transformation, *CIRCO* tries



*CIRCO* is a monthly publication that Tuñón has directed since 1993, first with Luis M. Mansilla and Luis Rojo and then, after Mansilla died in 2012, with Rojo and Jesús Vassallo.



Iñaki Ábalos and Juan Herreros are Spanish architects that worked associated between 1995 and 2008. Source: [www.scalae.net](http://www.scalae.net)



*Arquitectura* was a journal published by the Colegio Oficial de Arquitectos de Madrid (COAM). It started in 1918 as *Arquitectura, órgano de la Sociedad Central de Arquitectos*. In 1936, under Franco's dictatorship, its name changed to *Revista Nacional de Arquitectura*. In 1959 it was called *Arquitectura* again. The issues are available on [dialnet.es](http://dialnet.es). Source: Aitor Acilu (personal communication).



Luis Moreno Mansilla (1959-2012) was a Spanish architect, professor at ETSAM. He and Tuñón incorporated typical tools of procedural and performative art into architecture. Source: [www.esacademic.com](http://www.esacademic.com)



Luis Rojo is a Spanish architect, professor at ETSAM and associate of Rojo / Fernández-Shaw, Arquitectos Studio. He is a member of the Editorial Committee of the publication *Cuaderno de Proyectos Arquitectónicos*. Source: [rojofernandezshaw.es](http://rojofernandezshaw.es)



After moving to Paris in 1926, Calder began to produce – with wire, metal, cloth, cork, and rope – more than 70 tiny figures and almost 100 accessories for what would be his most beloved piece of work, *Cirque Calder*. Artists like Piet Mondrian, Joan Miró and Marcel Duchamp attended the shows. These shows introduced kineticism to Calder's art. Source: [collection.whitney.org](http://collection.whitney.org)



Carlos Vilardebó (Lisboa, 1926) is a Portuguese filmmaker and writer. His best-known works are *Une statuette* (1971), *As Ilhas Encantadas* (1965) and *Aérogare express* (1982). Source: [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)

**The main objective of CIRCO is the widening of the research playground within architecture, by the critical incorporation of the concepts, thoughts and links that allow for an enrichment of the theoretical discourse, teaching and professional practice.**

to widen the territory of speculation, in which essayistic reflection carves itself a way as an alternative and necessary tool.

In spite of its polyhedral condition, *CIRCO* does not try to question the value or usefulness of disciplinary and systemic reflections; however, it must be said that *CIRCO* inscribes itself within an environment in which the concept of freedom is contrasted with that of order. From this freedom of interests, *CIRCO* tries to widen the limits of the discipline in order to establish contact with a complex and open reality, revealing the wish to bring architecture closer to life.

*CIRCO* chooses a way of speaking about architecture in which personal re-description and the successive approaches through the essay coexist simultaneously. Or, in other words, *CIRCO* chooses the confrontation between private obsessions and public needs, as a method of analysis and knowledge.

*Through the years, decades, CIRCO has maintained without variation its format, its typography, its dissemination strategies. I understand that at the beginning it was based on photocopies, although now it probably is back-to-back printing. How did you define the medium of CIRCO? Why paper?*

It is necessary to acknowledge that part of the success of *CIRCO* is based on the flexibility of its format. Because it is easy to use for editors and readers, as well as for its fast and economic production and distribution, the format of *CIRCO* has become a great support for thought and discussion, which can be verified in numerous schools of architecture.

But, undoubtedly, what is most interesting of its format is its great versatility to accept texts and researches of widely diverse contents. Just to name some examples from the first series, *CIRCO* can include from lyric approaches to art performances, and also brilliant presentations on philosophy and art.

It must also be said that, in relation to the size of the essay to be published, the format of *CIRCO* allows editing issues with one DIN A4 (three A5 pages), with two A4 (seven pages), with three A4 (eleven pages) and, exceptionally, with four A4 (fifteen pages). Since about 400 words can be fitted in each A5 page – using 9 point Courier New – the text of an article published by *CIRCO* may vary between 800 words (A4 format, using only two A5) and 6.000 words (A4 format, using 15 pages), which increases the versatility of the format, allowing for short essays, in which one idea or elemental concept can be thrown in, as well as essays of a medium size, in which more complex discussions may be presented.

In relation to graphic displays, the idea in *CIRCO* is to reduce the use of drawings and pictures to the minimum, for obvious operational reasons and ease of reproduction, as well as to give priority to the written word over the image.

From the first moment, the format of *CIRCO* was based on a very elemental design, easy to lay out and fast to edit. The programme chosen was Quark-Xpress, a self-edition software that is easy to use, produced by Quark-Inc., which appeared in 1987 and can today be considered as one of the oldest in self-edition. Regarding the paper, we chose from the very beginning one of 90 grams, acid-free and cut to measure. All the issues are printed on an HP Color Laser Jet Enterprise M855 printer and the subsequent folding is done one by one, by hand.

Finally, it must be said that, despite the fact that *CIRCO* follows the traditional model of edition on paper, a simple **blog** has been created to allow for the consultation of the different issues and the different stages of *CIRCO*. Here, any researcher can access the contents and print all the issues, increasing the open and conversational condition of collective research.

*The blog certainly makes movement easy; however, you remain faithful to paper. Actually, in the last numbers of each series, there is always the final note saying "if you wish to continue participating in this conversation, send your request on a postcard addressed to...", which shows a loyalty to the analog. Do those who send a postcard still receive a printed copy? How many do you send and where to?*

Yes, everyone who sends a postcard receives the issues of *CIRCO* from that month on. Although at the beginning the publication of *CIRCO* was limited to just about 100 copies, in March 1993, due to the massive request of subscribers, the publication reached 500 copies, sent to people in countries all over the world.

*Who does the physical production of the journal? How long in advance is it prepared?*

On day a month, from the start of *CIRCO* until today, the whole office of Mansilla + Tuñón Arquitectos stops in order to lay out, edit and dispatch the 'cirkos' to the various participants. Edition day provides a chance to talk and exchange concerns and thoughts about architecture, and also about life, with people in the office.

*What is the place of CIRCO? Luis Rojo and you teach at ETSAM and, at the same time, practice architecture. Luis M. Mansilla also did both. Does CIRCO belong more to the professional office or to teaching? Is it independent? Does it use an intermediate place?*

Although since the beginning *CIRCO* has given editorial support and voice to a large number of professors and architects, it must be said that *CIRCO* has been, above all, the theoretical and conceptual support of the teaching and

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The blog's address is <http://mansilla-tunon-circo.blogspot.com.es>

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professional activity of three of its founding associates: Luis M. Mansilla, Luis Rojo and myself.

*How does the professional practice participate in, or drive, CIRCO? How does it drive your teaching? How does it participate in, or drive, the discipline in general?*

It is evident that behind any teaching or professional activity there is an analytical and reflective effort that constructs an active theoretical thinking, whose objective is to nurture the work of the professor and the architect. This thinking effort must be the result of a rigorous research work and of the alert and patient observation of a reality in continuous transformation.

That is to say, *CIRCO* is aware that every conceptual discourse is based, above all, and this is the most important, on our own architectural work and projects, so that, in the same way that **Carlos Martí** already said, every attempt of theoretical construction in architecture must assume an assistant role, a secondary condition, subject, therefore, to the works which are the real depositaries of knowledge in architecture. This complementary character of architectural theory does not diminish its importance at all, nor does it deny its decisive value. Because, and now literally quoting Martí's words in *CIRCO*, theory is "like the falsework that makes the construction of the arch possible: once its mission has been accomplished, it disappears and, therefore, does not form part of the perception we have of the finished work, but we know that it has been an essential and indispensable step, a necessary element in order to build what we now see and admire".

*I am interested in the relationship between the profession and the office, the métier of a group of professionals and the space they practice it in. Your present office (and Mansilla+Tuñón previously) is very particular, as it is presented as a space where the professional practice is integrated with teaching and theory (for example, the About of your web page states that "it is an office devoted to the confrontation of projective and constructive practice with theory and teaching"). This indicates that the three areas (projects, teaching and theory) happen in the physical space of the professional office. Going back to the previous question about the (literal) space of CIRCO, is CIRCO in the office of architecture?*

You are right, everything is the same space... Mansilla + Tuñón, Tuñón arquitectos, *CIRCO*, ETSAM, and so on. And all these spaces share collaborators, tools, thoughts. We often say that we are an office dedicated to the confrontation of theory and teaching with the projective and constructive practice.

*Continuing with the office, how did you reach the design of this space, with this distribution, this particular organization that allows for the confrontation*

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Carlos Martí Arís was in charge of *CIRCO* 2001-93. He is also author of *Las variaciones de la identidad. Ensayo sobre el tipo en arquitectura* (Fundación Caja de Arquitectos, 2014), where a version of this text appears.

*of theory and teaching on the one hand, and projective and constructive practice on the other? Is the office inspired in some model, some place in which you worked before?*

We have moved offices a lot. The present one is an old carpenter's shop which belonged to a friend, the owner of Carpinterías La Navarra. It is a wide space, designed by the great Miguel Fisac, from Madrid, but made with the left hand. The office is located in a street called Los Artistas, in an old neighbourhood of artisans from Madrid. The internal organisation takes on from what we had in our previous office, on Ríos Rosas Street, but it is wider and more spacious. We all work collectively, almost like a cooperative.

*Taking these same questions to a more general level, what is the place of theory in your architectural practice?*

As I have already said, CIRCO constitutes the intellectual formwork of the architectural work of Mansilla + Tuñón, as well as of our teaching practice. And in this way, our teaching and architectural work cannot be understood without the open conversation developed within the framework constructed by CIRCO.

*Do you think that your office, and previously Mansilla + Tuñón, is part of a certain Spanish tradition of making architecture? What would that be?*

Undoubtedly, Mansilla + Tuñón is part of the Spanish critical practice. It represents a line of work of Spanish architecture that proposes a practice from the description and analysis of the components that affect and determine architecture's contemporary practice, in both the conceptual and the productive aspect.

*Now I would like to talk about what is inside CIRCO: its acts and actors. While preparing my questions, I spent a beautiful day going (digitally) through all the past issues of CIRCO, superficially looking at some, reading others, downloading several. If you see who is writing and what they write about, you can say that, in general, CIRCO gives room to: architects through their works; architects through their biographies; buildings; cities; images; civic questions (political, economic); and cultural questions (art, literature and so on). Are the actors (architects, buildings, cities) that you bring into the CIRCO your heroes?*

No, we do not believe in heroes ...

*CIRCO is quite 'objectual': most of its 'themes' are things, buildings or matter; but, even so, there are several issues dedicated to pure and simple theory. Which one gives you more pleasure? Which is your favourite (between the objectual and the theoretical)?*

**CIRCO chooses the confrontation between private obsessions and public needs, as a method of analysis and knowledge.**

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Richard Rorty (1931-2007) was an influential North-American philosopher who caused polemic with his ironic and provoking texts. Professor at Princeton, Virginia and Stanford universities, he was a representative of pragmatic and analytical philosophy. He is the author of *The Linguistic Turn* (U. of Chicago Press, 1967) and *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton U. Press, 1979), among many other books. Source: planetadelibros.com; elmundo.es

## ★

*Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge U. Press, 1989) states that a true liberal culture, with a clear awareness of its historic contingency, would fuse individual freedom with the public project of human solidarity. It would not be philosophy, but literature, which can promote human solidarity in a real sense. Source: planetadelibros.cl

From the first moment, since its beginning, *CIRCO* has always tried to establish a "soft voice conversation, a space for the minor reason". This dialogue is imbued with the pragmatic thinking of **Richard Rorty**, expressed in his well-known book *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*.

In this way, *CIRCO* has tried to construct, over the years, a sort of *private provisional humanism*, that emerges from understanding that the particular circumstances are drafted as a starting point for a path presided by a way of *thinking through essays*, and that takes the form of a conversation. A *conversation* that may be understood as a wandering through the endless testing of ideas and forms, and that is the basis of our activity as researchers, professors and architects.

The model of the *conversation*, inscribed in *CIRCO* as a method and framework, is a creative form that takes things very precisely, to make evident the frictions between objects and ideas. From this point of view, *CIRCO* is no different from any other research, since the effort is put into finding a way in which things are expressed, understanding that research in architecture is hidden in the path of ideas and the way in which they are expressed.

Research in *CIRCO* is organised as a process of continuous oscillation between a systematic decomposition of reality and a hypothetical recomposition of the same. And this is why, when we talk about *CIRCO*, we are not interested in talking about themes, but of agreements and disagreements, of continuities and discontinuities, between ideas and things, between thought and reality.

***How are these oscillations, these interests, these frictions defined? Are these questions that come up in conversations, or do you have pre-made listings, related to projects in which they are working?***

*CIRCO* is an independent collective research that selects researches by means of a collegial selection process. Every work proposed by an author must be analysed and valued by the editorial council, formed at present by Luis Rojo, Jesús Vassallo and myself.

The various researches published in *CIRCO* draw a map of the concerns of the various architects who participate in the series. In their diversity, they construct a vivid portrait of private obsessions and shared interests on which to work, within that permanent oscillation between ideas and things that the practice of architecture is about. And although all the personal researches brought together in *CIRCO* have an individual value, the most important in *CIRCO* is the collective and relational condition of all of them, understood as parts of a complex and diverse group.

***On the other hand, we could interpret that, at the beginning, CIRCO was the effort of a young office trying to intellectually position itself in the local***

*environment, a sort of self-definition that implies establishing relationships with others: 'on the shoulders of', 'next to', 'questioning that'. How has that been rearticulated over time? What is its role now?*

I do not think it was like that (he laughs). We were too young and very naïve! We only wanted to confront our private obsessions with public needs, following Richard Rorty's words from *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*: "Poetic, artistic, philosophical, scientific, or political progress results from the accidental coincidence of a private obsession with a public need".

Nowadays, perhaps we identify ourselves more cynically with these words of **Boris Groys**, taken from *On the New*: "Innovation does not consist in the appearance of something new, but in transmuting the value of something that has always been seen and known".

*There is great beauty in the language of CIRCO. What do you think of that?*

The sonority of CIRCO has to do, largely, with the figure of Luis M. Mansilla, architect and poet who died in 2012. Luis and I embarked on a trip in which the aim of the conversations were no longer the conclusions, but the process, involving the literature and poetry of everything around us.

*What do you like to read? What are you reading now? Do you follow any architecture journal?*

Evidently, I enjoy reading very much; I am currently reading Boris Groys' book *On the New: An Essay on a Cultural Economy*. I am very interested in the writing of **Rafael Moneo** and **Josep Quetglas**, although I share many of the interests of people like **Andrés Jaque** and **Uriel Fogueé**. I must say that, in general, I avoid reading architecture journals.

*I would like to ask you about your starting point: "CIRCO is a soft voice conversation. A space for the minor reason". At the beginning, who was that conversation with? How did it evolve?*

CIRCO began as an unfinished conversation with the largest number of friends, whether they were researchers, professors or architects. And it ended up constructing a sort of 'scientific autobiography' of Mansilla + Tuñón; an autobiography of a personal nature that tries to make the secret threads between thinking, teaching and professional practice visible; an autobiography constructed as a polyhedron with which to fasten observations, not with the purpose of constructing a sole truth, but a space where to continue questioning whether what surrounds us is a thing or an idea, and to blur the distinction between the abstract and the concrete.

*What types of conversations have surprised you?*

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**Boris Groys** (Berlín, 1947) is a philosopher, art critic and media theoretician. He is Professor at the University of New York and Senior Research Fellow at the HfG Karlsruhe. Amongst his books are: *On the New: An Essay on a Cultural Economy* (Hanser, 1992), *Under Suspicion: A Phenomenology of Media* (Hanser, 2000) and *The Total Art of Stalinism* (Princeton U. Press, 1992). Sources: [cajanegraeditora.com.ar/jordanrussiacenter.org](http://cajanegraeditora.com.ar/jordanrussiacenter.org)

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*On the New: An Essay on a Cultural Economy* (first published in German by Hanser in 1992) "concentrates on the ways of establishing or defining what we consider innovative within intellectual creation". Source: [el.pais.com](http://el.pais.com)

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**Rafael Moneo** (Tudela, 1937) is a Spanish architect. He studied at the ETSAM, where he was a student of Leopoldo Torres Balbás. After graduating he worked at Jørn Utzon's studio. He co-founded the journal *Arquitectura Bis*. He is a Professor at Harvard GSD. Amongst his books are *Inquietud Teórica y Estrategia Proyectual en la Obra de ocho arquitectos contemporáneos* (Actar, 2004) and *Rafael Moneo: Remarks on 21 works* (Thames & Hudson, 2010). Winner of the Pritzker Prize 1996. Sources: [gsd.harvard.edu/pritzkerprize.com](http://gsd.harvard.edu/pritzkerprize.com)

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**Josep Quetglas** (Palma, 1946) is a Spanish architect, considered to be one of the greatest world-specialists on Le Corbusier. He is a professor at ETSAB. Some of his latest publications are his collection of essays *Restos de arquitectura y crítica de la cultura* (Arcadia, 2017) and *Les Heures Claires: proyecto y arquitectura en la Villa Savoye de Le Corbusier y Pierre Jeanneret* (Associació d'Idees, 2009).

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**Andrés Jaque** (Madrid, 1971) is a Spanish architect and thinker, founder of the Oficina de Innovación Política. He is Professor of Advanced Design at Columbia GSAPP and Guest Professor at Princeton SoA. Some of his noted books are *Dulces Arenas Cotidianas* (Lugadero, 2013) and *Transmaterial/Calculable* (ARQ, 2017). Source: [andresjaque.net](http://andresjaque.net)

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**Uriel Fogueé** (Madrid, 1976) is a Spanish architect and professor of Universidad Europea, Madrid. Member and co-founder of the research group [Inter]sección de Filosofía y Arquitectura and one of the directors of the debate group Gabinete de Crisis de Ficciones Políticas. Director of the architectural office Elii. He is co-author of *What is Home Without a Mother* (HIAP - MataderoMadrid, 2015) and co-editor of *Planos de intersección: materiales para un diálogo entre filosofía y arquitectura* (Lampreave, 2011). Source: [urielfoguee.com](http://urielfoguee.com); comunicación personal, 2017



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All of them. A personal reading of the ten series of *CIRCO*, understood as a scientific autobiography, proposes a journey through things as diverse as the following: the place as the origin of architecture, equality and diversity, repetition and randomness, the field condition, complementary geometry, sound and sense, conversation as a way of knowing, sight and action, the freedom of fragments, maps and walks, the reformulation of the ground, infrastructures, cartographies and the measure of the world, the earth and its territory, urban borders, travelling, history and memory, the public and the private, the possible and the realistic utopia, found objects, heterogeneous groupings, the double of the world, the small and the necessary, silence, space and time...

*Has this conversation remained as a 'minor' one or has it changed?*

Well, yes, I think *CIRCO* continues to be simply a minor conversation among friends... an unfinished conversation, in which all of us miss the voice of our beloved Luis. 

*Every attempt of theoretical construction in architecture must assume an assistant role, a secondary condition, subject, therefore, to the works which are the real depositaries of knowledge in architecture.*