

Paper Frames. A.C. Avant-garde Paradigm

Aitor Acilu

Universidad de Navarra

ETSA

Pamplona, Spain

aacilu@gmail.com

Keywords: Architectural Theory, Journals (Periodicals), Modernist, Mediterranean, G.A.T.E.P.A.C.

Translation: María Isabel Bizama

ABSTRACT

Editorial organs linked to the field of architecture have allowed the fostering of relationships, interactions and the exchange of ideas over time. The case of the Spanish architectural journal of the 30s A.C. is a particular editorial evidence within the modern movement. The journal was born as a body of expression of an alternative attitude, independent from the established academic world. The analysis of its context and raison d'être, the themes dealt with, its condition as a 'setting', its evolution, the alliances it involved, its definition as 'weapon' or its consideration as space for discovering the new, but also as a 'journey' to the past, supposes recognizing the rich and transversal character of this and other journals.

A.C.: DOCUMENTOS DE ACTIVIDAD CONTEMPORÁNEA

75 Aribau Street, Barcelona. L'Stampa workshops, 1931. Sheets of slightly glossy paper, printed in black and white, are piled near the cutting table to take the

established measures: 25.8 x 48.4 cm. They await being placed in order, stapled and finally folded to acquire an almost square format of approximately 25.8 x 24 cm. A manageable pamphlet, flexible, with a studied size, so that what is printed can be adequately perceived. This is how the journal A.C.: Documentos de Actividad Contemporánea took physical shape.

The first issue was published in the first trimester of 1931 (Figure 1). It had been laid out and checked very carefully. It was clear, legible and pedagogically made and written. It combined didactic intentions of polemics and didactic dissemination, exposing rationalist theories, that went from the problematic of avant-garde art to the specifically technical, going through fields of design, urbanism and construction (Tarragó, 1972, p. 51).

In the first 40-page issue, the publication showed a varied content. In the first ten pages as well as in the last seven, there was publicity of the various sponsors. The main topics were announced on the cover of the document⁽¹⁾ and the set was completed by a news section and a list of publications of the time that the editors thought more interesting.

In addition, the first issue fulfilled the function of being the presentation card and means of expression of the G.A.T.E.P.A.C. (Group of Spanish Artists and Technicians for the Progress of Contemporary Architecture), and so it included works done by members of the group of modern architects, like the Casa Vilaró in San José de la Montaña, by Sixte Illescas; the Ibarra Schools —plans only— and the 'Sacha' Pastry Shop and

Tasting Salon in San Sebastián, by José Manuel Aizpurúa and Joaquín Labayen; the Residence for students of the SHCB in Bilbao, by Luis Vallejo; and a study of hotel rooms, done by Ricardo Churruga and Germán Rodríguez Arias.

The G.A.T.E.P.A.C. had been founded in Zaragoza in 1930, joining the International Committee for the Resolution of Problems of Contemporary Architecture (C.I.R.P.A.C.). It had three branches or groups: North, Centre and East. At the beginning, the journal had been conceived as something produced alternatively by the different groups. However, the contribution of the North and the Centre Group to A.C. got progressively scarce, and the editorial responsibility fell on the Barcelona group, with architect Josep Torres Clavé, partner of Josep Lluís Sert, taking the lead.

Until 1933, the diffusion of A.C. in the national territory was limited, and its demand abroad was also limited (Ares, 2010, chap. 4, p. 183). After the promotional campaign done between 1934-35, the journal reached 101 subscribers outside Spain and 421 Spanish subscribers (F. R. R., 1972, p. 51). However, bearing in mind the short life of the journal, the number is not insignificant.

Starting from the detailed analysis of the journal in its six years of existence, various readings can be extracted that show the multifaceted character of this avant-garde publication. Likewise, such analysis allows deepening the study of its role as a framework for the theoretical debate that supposed the incidence of

the modern movement in architecture, its interpretation and its evolution.

CONTEXT AND PRETEXT

We should go back to the decade of 1920 in order to understand the context and the reason why the G.A.T.E.P.A.C. and its A.C. started. By then, two friends, Josep Lluís Sert and Josep Torres Clavé, were finishing their studies at the School of Architecture in Barcelona, and the teaching was focused on the learning and application of classicist postulates. Sert and Torres Clavé —with other classmates— diagnosed a fundamental disconnection between the ways their professors formulated architecture and the demands of the social reality of the moment. Overrun by a rebellious spirit, they chose to explore ways that would allow them to propose a new architecture that would respond to the needs of their time (Freixa, 2005, p. 230).

Inspired at first by ideas from the Renaissance, they began to combine the study of the reasons that had promoted architecture throughout history with the examination of examples of the new modern European architecture appearing in some of the avant-garde publications of the moment. Some journals that stand out, in this sense, were *Das Neue Frankfurt* or *Die Form*. Texts like “Internationale Architektur”, by Walter Gropius or, above all, “Vers une Architecture”, by Le Corbusier, were highly influential. The ‘new spirit’ began to establish itself into the thinking of young architects.

At the same time that this positioning was being developed at student level in Barcelona, a somewhat different spirit, but also a renewing trend, had been generated a few years before in Madrid. Architects like Rafael Bergamín, Fernando García Mercadal, Luis Lacasa and others formed what would later be called

Generación del ‘25 (*Generation of the ‘25*) (Bohigas, 1970, p. 7). The clash between tradition and avant-garde was imminent: on the one hand, schools instructed on classical compositions; and on the other, against that, avant-garde European references appeared in the chronicles published in the journal *Arquitectura* (Urrutia, 2003, p. 230). The G.A.T.E.P.A.C. would soon be founded and, with it, its editorial organ of expression, A.C.

THEMES AND SETTING

The need to propose new solutions in the social field, giving priority to the functional and rational against other compositional elements, brought the architects of G.A.T.E.P.A.C. together. Several published topics of interest can be mentioned, like urbanistic strategies for the recovery and reactivation of deteriorated spaces of large cities, architectural theory and criticism, typological studies, the presentation of their own and foreign works, or the exhibition of social topics such as the problem of school architecture, the use of free time, hygiene, interior design, and so on (Tarragó, 1972).

The defence of these questions made A.C. different from other contemporary national publications, for its expressivity and for breaking away from established styles, even in terms of graphic language. Regarding concepts, the approaches contained in A.C. show the naivety as well as the radicalism of these young Catalan architects looking for change (Figure 2).

Detailed reading of the letters related to their editorial work – classified in the collection of Group East of the G.A.T.E.P.A.C. at the *Colegio Oficial de Arquitectos de Cataluña* –, allows discovering an interesting network of connexions around the journal⁽²⁾. The interest for showing more up-to-date

examples forced Spanish architects to import material from other contexts; at the same time, the active editorial process was a means of spreading the journal to their established international contacts. The main topics on which each edition focused allowed establishing links between models of avant-garde architectures, past architectures or even proposals for competitions, favouring the consolidation of a modern discourse. The journal became a square paper ‘setting’ for national and international authors.

This debate took place in an unstable social and political climate, in which an emerging economic crisis began to be noticed. These were turbulent years in Spain as well as in Europe and the avant-garde artistic activism became political and social activism. Colleagues of G.A.T.E.P.A.C. took part in the conflict that was ready to come, distributed in various groups (Brullet & Illescas, 2008, p. 109). In the decade of 1930, A.C. would become a meeting ‘place’, not only within the realms of architecture and art, but also with reference to the political diversity of its collaborators.

GRAPHIC AND PHOTOGRAPHIC WEAPON

A.C. emerged as tool of expression of an alternative attitude, independent from the established academic world. Associated to a determined professional group, its edition was proposed, from the beginning, as a symbol of encounter, of alliance, of negotiation and of agreement among different members.

Before A.C. two journals stood out in Spain: *Arquitectura y Cortijos y Rascacielos*, to which other four would be added later on: *Arquitectura i Urbanisme*, *Obras, Viviendas y Nuevas Formas* (Granell, 2005, p. 179). However, a pamphletary character could be observed in

A.C., as in other avant-garde publications of the time. Actually, A.C. was not an architectural journal in the strict sense (López Rivera, 2012, p. 66).

The appearance of numerous announcers is not a coincidence either. In this case, 'sponsorization' went beyond financial need. It was a phenomenon that was incorporated, adding complexity and solidity to the editorial process. It is, in itself, part and action of the innovating and renewing trend motivated by G.A.T.E.P.A.C.:

"An association of architects and technicians has been formed in order to contribute to the challenge of the new universal orientation in architecture and resolving and studying the problems presented in their adaptation to our context in our country, (...). The Centre Group and the North Group are already working to get the joining together of various industrialists in their respective locations. (...) The East Group has managed to join several industrialists from Barcelona, who have exhibited their articles there" (Vv. Aa., 1931, p. 34).

The journal thus supposes the union of theory – through the articulation of the modern manifesto, its debate, its criticism and its references – and practice – encouraging the incorporation of novel materials and the renovation and reactivation of certain industrial sectors. In this sense, it will have nothing in common with the Spanish architectural publications mentioned above. A.C. emerges like a weapon (Granell, 2005, p. 179); like power – a media power –, which will allow the editorial group to strengthen the image it wanted to project and with which G.A.T.E.P.A.C. wanted to be acknowledged.

The choice of name for the journal and the use of graphics (Sanz Esquide, 2005, p. 177), as well as its particular layout, caused the modern flavour of the European avant-garde, through the image of the journal, to permeate each of the published editions. It has been pointed out that the name refers to the end of G.A.T.E.P.A.C. and C.I.R.P.A.C., and it has been suspected that the typography comes from Moisei Ginzburg's SA journal — graphed 'CA'—, of which 6 annual editions were published from 1926 to 1930 (Granell, 2005, pp.179-180). Undoubtedly, the editorial work would acquire noteworthy importance. Typography, composition and synthetic and direct graphics were fundamental aspects that would determine the character of the modern and distinctive message.

Progressive aesthetics, forged in the avant-garde European workshops and printing houses, were also studied by the architects through the samples they managed to import. Torres, Sert and the others wanted to be at the level of their foreign colleagues and so, when the first issue of A.C. came out, it exuded references to other European models, like the case of Das Neue Frankfurt (Figure 3). Demand was high. So, in October 1933, a well-known member of the group, José Manuel Aizpurúa, contacted Torres Clavé with a proposal for improving the journal:

"It would be convenient to study the possibility of making a sort of bulletin, like the one edited by PLANS at the end of its time. Something rather inexpensive and very pure, of an exaggerated purism" (Aizpurúa, J. M. to J. Torres Clavé, October 17, 1933).

Aizpurúa – whose work for the Real Club Náutico de San Sebastián had been selected for the "International Style"

exhibition organised at the Museum of Modern Art in New York by Philip Johnson and Henry Russell Hitchcock in 1932 – had just become a member of the Falange and considered PLANS – a French extreme right-wing publication in which Le Corbusier had published some articles (Antliff, 2007) – a fantastic example to take into consideration.

Photography, on the other hand, had a central role. Documenting buildings became as important, or even more so, than making them. Surprising points of view, with worm's eye views and bird's eye views, graphic composition ruled by perceptive, luminic and material principles, light control fostering abstraction or the use of photomontages and collages invaded the pages of A.C. (Figure 4). Photographers like Domingo Viñets, F. Oriol, Margaret Michaelis, but also architects themselves – such as the remarkable cases of Aizpurúa or Rodríguez Arias among others – took the camera, contributing to the construction of this image of modernity. Their expertise was complemented with the editor's and together they contributed to the mise-en-scène of a triple modern language. New architecture, new typography and new photography combined their strength at their presentation in society.

EVOLUTION AND ALLIANCES

After a beginning dedicated to the projection of the most international and rationalist modern ideals, the Mediterranean experience of CIAM IV in 1933 made the journal evolve substantially. Numbers 18 and 19 showed the inflection point. Tube furniture disappeared, giving prominence to wood and straw. And, in the meantime, local and cultural references became more important, causing artisanal work to surpass technology (Figure 5).

Mediterraneity as a reference for modernity was clearly becoming the protagonist and showed the alliances made at CIAM IV among representatives of countries linked to the Latin Sea. Undoubtedly, the influence of the Mediterranean policy of Le Corbusier can be felt after that shift of direction. The Mediterranean myth, re-interpreted and largely introduced into modern debate by the Swiss master, even at the beginning of the decade of 1930, began to crystallise among its supporters in the Spanish scene.

*By then, Le Corbusier had already been a member of the editorial department of the French journal *Prélude* and, during that time, he had tried to create a sort of *Fédération Méditerranéenne* with Paris, Rome, Barcelona and Algiers, forming an alliance with the Italian journal *Quadrante* and with A.C. (Pizza, 2008, p. 247). This joining of forces, by means of an editorial strategy, aimed at shifting modern architecture towards a significant 'Latin' expressiveness. As Le Corbusier stated in a letter to Sert⁽³⁾:*

"Italians are extremely agitated at the moment. Their journals are remembered with enthusiasm in modern architecture (...) The situation is clearly defined in the international scene: Latins are retaking the banner of modernity and the Nordic are swallowing it" (as cited in Pizza, 2008, p. 247).

The change of direction marked a clear contrast with the most 'international' modern proposals, for which the new forms, stripped of all reference, incited to believe in the codification of a universal language (Ares, 2010, chap. 6, p. 85). Thus, the alliances of CIAM IV began to take shape and, in 1935, issue 18 of A.C. showed this modern alternative line: "Modern architecture is a return

to the pure, traditional forms of the Mediterranean. It is the victory of the Latin sea!" (Vv. Aa., 1933, p. 33).

Mediterranean references would give way to the introduction of these knowledges in the proposals built by members of G.A.T.C.P.A.C. It was time to give space to proposals, capture the trace left by the visits to the East, Andalucía or Ibiza; to formalise and materialise the most theoretical proposals. It was necessary to speak through architecture.

THE JOURNEY

It is typical of the genre of journalism to go where the news are, where things happen. Josep Torres Clavé and Josep Lluís Sert were no different. Material, like articles and documents, derived from the travelling activity can be seen in the pages of the journal. Some worth mentioning are the CIAM meetings, whose summaries began to be published in the news section of the fifth issue (published between pages 38 and 40), and which in later issues took the format of an article, including photographs of the event (Figure 6); inaugurations of exhibitions (like the case of issue 2, page 36), visits to buildings and their analysis; and notes and photographs of excursions into remote villages. All of this will be collected in the pages of the journal.

On the other hand, the limited amount of material of a publishable quality and the readers' demands would force editors to include foreign collaborations, like the case of Erwin Heilbronner's contributions (1936) and Raoul Hausmann's (1936). Their analytical works on the rural architecture of Ibiza would be published in issue 21. Both "travellers" would collaborate in this way with texts and photographs to illustrate a reality anchored in the past in their two completely avant-garde readings.

These examples not only underline the value of the journey as a means of generating A.C., but also allow finding in the journal a means of travel that invited the reader of the time, and also of today, to visit new places and past times. The physical journal, as material legacy, then reaches a second dimension as a means of travel (Figure 7).

TODAY

On July 18th, 1936, the darkness that every battle represents hovered over the diaphanous square pages of A.C.. Civil war had just started in Spain and the duties and intentions of artists, thinkers and architects were postponed, as they entered into service of the different fronts or left for exile. The new tasks, besides surviving, were the commitment to the dissemination and defence of the ideals of each side. With the publication of number 25 of the journal, the paths of all A.C. collaborators separated and did not coincide until many years later – in other contexts – and, in some cases, never coincided again.


More than eighty years later, we can reflect on how the theoretical enterprise, proactive, critical and redeeming, has assumed new ways and formats in the hands of entrepreneurs, followers and collaborators of editorial ventures. Like in A.C., the authors – editors, photographers, translators and writers – become vital to understanding the resulting language. From their interaction can emerge the editorial framework that can allow for the debate, exchange, proclamation and evolution of ideas.

But now, times have changed. In the same way that the architects of the 19th Century sensed change with the arrival of the 'machine' – without being able to forecast their architectures, theories, journals – from the last years of the 20th Century we

have witnessed the arrival of the 'digital'. It is interesting to imagine what will be the issues to deal with, the new settings, the 'weapons' to use, the alliances to establish, the evolution of it, or whether any of this will have any meaning because of the new logic and ways of operating.

As the Internet implies the idea of searching, of information consumption, it is governed by speed and the rule of the latest. The digital boasts of variety and freedom of choice, but at the same time, it forces choice. As time becomes an unmanageable parameter, it demands the filtering of an increasing amount of information. Diffusion is near confusion, fostering a situation where there is a place for every shade of grey, and distinguishing between this and that becomes difficult. Rigour, reference and interaction often become impossible.

In the present times of maximum production and reproduction, it seems logical to question, from what has been presented, whether digital formats compare to past editorial examples, or, reversely, whether new ideas, tools or phenomena have been developed in these new immaterial frameworks – and, if so, what is their power.

At a moment when physical supports still share space with the digital, it is safe to ask whether the theoretical level is reduced to the academic world, the official realm of intellectuality. It may also be necessary to reflect on whether these barriers are being overtaken, whether the field is demanding, as in the first decades of the last century, an evolution: to open a way for the widening, extending and facilitating of the present avant-garde debate (if at all). These questions are some of those that remain, still sheltered by the paper framework. 

NOTES

(1) "Exhibition of Modern Painting and Architecture of San Sebastián", "Standard' wood doors", "Urbanization of future Barcelona", "Enlargement of Ceuta", "San Pol de Mar (Barcelona)", "Hotel rooms, Photography-Cinema", "The green city of Moscow".

(2) Going through the two lists called "Series 1" and "Series 2", it can be observed that the architects were familiar with at least 125 publications – daily, weekly and monthly – distributed within 14 countries. In Spain: *Arquitectura*, *Gaceta de Arte*, *Luz*, *Mirador*, *L'opinio*; in England: *The Architects Journal*, *The Architectural Review*, *The Spectator*, *The Listener* Broadcasting House, *The Week End Review*, *New Britaine*, *Illustrated London News*, *Country Life*, *Arch. S. Building News*, *Building*, *Observer*, *Sunday Times*, *John o'London*, *Everyman*, *Times*, *Manchester Guardian*, *Design for Today*, *Life & Lett*, *London Mueny*, *Studio*, *Master Builder*; in Switzerland: *Schweiz*, *Bauzeitung*, *Die neue Stadt*, *Volksrecht*, *N.Z.Z.*, *Ouvres*, *Gazette de Laussane*, *de Laussane*, *Journal de la construction* (sic.), *La suisse*, *Nationalzeitung*, *Basler Nachrichten*, *St. Galler Tagblatt*, *Thurgauerzeitung*, *Glaner Tagblatt*, *Berner Bund*, *Werk*, *Ideales Heim*; in Poland: *Praesens*, *Dom*; in Holland: *Opbouw*, *de 8*; in Belgium: *La cité*; in Czechoslovakia: *Stavba*, *Stavitel*; in France: *Cashier d'art*, *Art et Industrie*, *L'Art vivant*, *Architecture d'aujourd'hui*, *Minotaure*, *L'Architecte*, *Le Larousse mensuel*, *Le mois*, *Nature*, *Art et Decoration*, *Le journal*, *Le Matin*, *L'Echo de Paris*, *Le petit Parisien*, *Le petit Journal*, *Le Temps*, *Le Journal des Débats*, *L'Intransigeant*, *Paris Soir*, *Paris Midi*, *Oeuvre*, *Action Française*, *Figaro*, *Le Quotidien*, *La Liberté*, *Le Rempart*, *Comoedia*, *Le populaire*, *Humanité*, *Excelsior*, *New York Harald* (French edition), *Daily Mail* (French edition), *L'Illustration*, *Beaux-Arts*, *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, *Vue*, *Voilà*, *Candide*, *Suis partout*, *Marianne*, *Cringoire*, *Miroir du Monde*, *Le Monde illustré*, *Monde*, *L'Animateur des temps nouveaux*, *Le journal de Rouen*, *La Dépêche de Toulouse*, *La petite Girondine*, *L'Ouest Eclair*, *Le petit Marseillais*, *Le Progrès de Lyon*, *L'Eclair de Montpellier*; in Norway: *Byggemastaren*; in Denmark: *Arkitekten*; in Finland: *Arkitehti*, *Domus*; in Italy: *Il secolo XIX*, *Bolletino del Milioni*, *L'Impero*, *Il Popolo di Brescia*, *Il Lavoro Fascista*, *Casabella*, *Il Popolo di Sicilia*; in Germany: *Frankfurter Zeitung*, *Vossische Zeitung*, *Kölonische Zeitung*; and in Yugoslavia: *Jutarnji List*, *Obzor*, *Politika*. Source: FGATCPAC-AH-COAC, Barcelona.

REFERENCES

AIZPURÚA, J. M. (1933). Letter to Josep Torres Clavé, dated on October 17th, 1933. FGATCPAC-AH-COAC, Barcelona, Spain.

ANTLIFF, M. (2007). *Avant-Garde Fascism: The Mobilization of Myth, Art, and Culture in France, 1909-1939*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

ARES, O. (2010). *GATEPAC (1928-1939)* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura. Universidad de Valladolid, Valladolid.

BOHIGAS, O. (1970). *Arquitectura Española de la Segunda República*. Barcelona, Spain: Tusquets.

BRULLET, M., & ILLESCAS, A. (2008). *Sixte Illescas arquitecte (1903-1986)*. Barcelona, Spain: COAC.

F. R. R. (1972). La difusión de "A.C.". *Cuadernos de Arquitectura y Urbanismo*, (90), 51.

FREIXA, J. (2005). *Josep Lluís Sert*. Barcelona, Spain: ETSAB; Santa & Cole.

GRANELL, E. (2005). AC contra todos. In *Actas del V Congreso Fundación DOCOMOMO Ibérico* (pp. 179-189). Barcelona.

HAUSMANN, R. (1936). Elementos de la arquitectura rural en la isla de Ibiza. A.C.: *Documentos de Actividad Contemporánea*, (21), 11–14.

HEILBRONNER, E. (1936). Ibiza (Baleares). Las viviendas Rurales. A.C.: *Documentos de Actividad Contemporánea*, (21), 15–23.

LÓPEZ RIVERA, F. J. (2012). *El proyecto de la construcción de la imagen de la arquitectura moderna 1925-1939*. Andalucía. *Margaret Michaelis* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura. Universidad de Sevilla, Sevilla.

PIZZA, A. (2008). Sincretismos mediterráneos. In E. Granel, A. Pizza, J. Á. Sanz Esquide, & J. M. Rovira, A.C.: *La revista del GATEPAC, 1931-1937* (pp. 243-255). Madrid, Spain: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía.

SANZ ESQUIDE, J. (2005). A propósito de la cultura de la imagen. In *Actas del V Congreso Fundación DOCOMOMO Ibérico* (pp. 177-187). Barcelona.

TARRAGÓ, S. (1972). A.C.: *Documentos de Actividad Contemporánea*. Publicación del GATEPAC. Barcelona-Madrid-San Sebastián, 1931-37. *Cuadernos de Arquitectura y Urbanismo*, (90), 51.

URRUTIA, A. (2003). *Arquitectura Española Siglo XX*. Madrid, Spain: Catedra.

VV. AA. (1931). Sección de Noticias: G.A.T.E.P.A.C. A.C.: *Documentos de Actividad Contemporánea*, (1), 32-34.

VV. AA. (1933). Raíces Mediterráneas de la Arquitectura Moderna. A.C.: *Documentos de Actividad Contemporánea*, (18), 31-36.