Building Connections Between Finland and Spain through the USA. Johnson Visiting Scholar Experience at the Finnish Initiatives Program

Lucía C. Pérez-Moreno, Diana Vega-López
School of Engineering and Architecture, Zaragoza University (SPAIN)

Abstract

Through a donation from Don and Maria Johnson, the College of Architecture and Planning at the University of Colorado-Denver (CAP) has created a "Finland Initiatives" program that includes funding for exchanges, guest lectures and research about Finnish Architecture to develop at the CAP in Denver (USA).

In 2016, the first Johnson’s Visiting Scholar (JVS) was for a Spanish Scholar from the University of Zaragoza (UZ) whose research project was titled: “Spain and the Finnish Architects in the Sixties”. The research project’s main scope was to research the so-called ‘Organic Decade of Spanish Architecture’ (1958-1968), a terminology created by the Spanish Critic Juan Daniel Fullaondo to define the influence that Nordic architecture had in Spain. Fullaondo principally pointed out the work of the architects Antonio Fernandez Alba (1927-) and Fernando Higuera (1930-2008) as the most representative of this influence. Previously, he had also observed the impact of the Swiss architect Asplund on other Spanish architects, such as Miguel Fisac, and later this Nordic connection was extended to Finnish architecture, specifically in relation with the work of Alvar Aalto and Reima Pietilä.

The principal aim of this Research Project was to analyse the relationship between Spanish and Finnish architects firstly by studying the writings on Finnish Architecture published in Spanish Architecture Magazines, and secondly by studying the influence of those reflections in the projects built in Spanish soil in the Sixties.

We would like to present research and teaching possibilities of this international program for a non-American scholar. On the one hand, and thanks to the coordinated work with the Finland Initiative Director, Professor Taisto Mäkelä (Ph.D, Princeton University, 1991) was possible to accomplish different activities in order to develop the research project presented as well as to build new connections between Spain and Finland thought the CAP. Some of the research results were an article in a Q1 Journal, a proceeding at the Society of Architectural Historians Meeting (SAH), and a guest lecture at the CAP, which was important to reflect on the History of Spanish Modern Architecture to an American audience. On the other hand, we would like to present an e-Learning experience as an example of the link between education and research. We have the opportunity to supervise a Final Architecture Degree Thesis (FD-Thesis) developed by a Spanish Student. It was the first time that a FD-Thesis in Architecture was co-supervised by an American and a Spanish Scholar at UZ. The thesis studies the writings of Raili and Reima Pietilä (Finnish Architects) at the architecture magazine based in Helsinki Le Carre Blue. The aim was to study the connection between those writings and his design for a Church in Kaleva (Tampere, Finland, 1966). The supervision was done online by weekly e-Tutoring hours.

Keywords: E-Tutoring, Alvar Aalto, Reima Pietilä, Juan Daniel Fullaondo, Antonio Fernández Alba, Exchange Project, International Cooperation.

1 INTRODUCTION

Through a donation from Don and Maria Johnson, the College of Architecture and Planning at the University of Colorado-Denver (CAP) has created a "Finland Initiatives" program that includes funding for exchanges, guest lectures and research about Finnish Architecture to develop at the CAP in Denver (USA) [1].

2 BUILDING CONNECTIONS THROUGH RESEARCH

In 2016, Ph.D. Pérez-Moreno, Spanish Scholar from the University of Zaragoza (UZ), visit the CAP as Johnson Visiting Scholar. Thanks to the coordinated work with the Finland Initiative Director, professor
Taisto Mäkelä (Ph.D, Princeton University, 1991), was possible to accomplish different activities in order to develop a research project that studied the connections between Spanish and Finnish Architecture in the 1960s. Some of the research results were an article in a Q1 Journal, and a proceeding for the 2017 Society of Architectural Historians Meeting (SAH) in Glasgow. Therefore, professor Pérez-Moreno lectured at the CAP, which was important to reflect on the History of Spanish Modern Architecture and its international connections to an American audience.

2.1 Research Topic

In 1968, the Spanish critic and historian Juan Daniel Fullaondo noted the great - also unknown at that moment - influence that some Nordic architects had in Spanish architecture. This prompted him to use the term ‘Organic Decade’ to describe the years that go from 1958 to 1968, after Italian historian Bruno Zevi’s defense of organic architecture [2]. Fullaondo pointed out the work of the Spanish architects Antonio Fernandez Alba and Fernando Higueras as the most representative of this influence. Previously, Fullaondo had also observed the impact of the Swiss architect Eric Gunnar Asplund on other Spanish architects, such as Miguel Fisac, and later this Nordic connection was extended to Finnish architecture, specifically in relation with the work of Alvar Aalto and Reima Pietilä.

It is true that, on the one side, in the recent history of Spanish Architecture the legacy of Miguel Fisac and its connection with Nordic architecture – essentially with Asplund’s and Aalto’s works – has been studied. These studies, however, has had a limited presence on English and Nordic journals. On the other side, the influence - and similarities - of Alvar Aalto’s legacy on Antonio Fernandez Alba’s work has been scantily analysed, except for some general outlines in a few Spanish historical texts. Meanwhile, the affinity between Fernando Higueras and Reima Pietilä is still unexplored. Thus, the principal aim of the research project was to go deeper into the influence and relationship between those two partners: Aalto/Fernandez Alba and Pietilä/Higueras. It could be, subsequently, the basis to trace a rigorous research that explains and illustrates the architectural connections between both countries during this decade.

3 RESEARCH ON AALTO

In 1960, the Spanish magazine Arquitectura dedicated a special issue on Aalto edited by a young and charismatic architect, Antonio Fernández-Alba [3] that included several essays and photography features of building such as Sunila Factory, Villa Mairea, Paimio, the MIT Dormitory and others. The authors involved, however, focused essentially on the buildings with spare descriptions and photos without a historical or cultural critique of Aalto’s architecture. Thus, they mainly offered broad impressions about Aalto’s work. Nevertheless, the essay Fernández-Alba identified Aalto as part of the “organic movement” proposed in Bruno Zevi’s Storia dell’architettura moderna [4], which is important to evaluate the relevance that Zevi had in Spanish architecture culture. Therefore, Fernández-Alba did present a chronology with comments of Aalto’s life and work titled “The Work of Alvar Aalto” [5] which revealed his interest and knowledge on Aalto. Fernández-Alba also discussed how Aalto combined Finnish traditional architecture with the language of modern architecture and new technical developments. He wrote, “Aalto’s plastic language is part of the rationalist tendencies, but without preconceived shapes. He uses the tools that he has in his hands, elementary materials, such as brick, wood or lime”. Indeed, all the people involved in this issue shared an admiration for Aalto’s ability to integrate hand-made tradition with new functional architecture.

Antonio Fernandez Alba had been one of the first Spanish architects to write about Finnish architecture. In 1962, his design for a Convent in Salamanca won the National Architecture Award. This project is a significant example of the influence of Aalto’s architecture, which can be spotted in its powerful layout, the use of a complex topography or its brick construction system.

In view of the situation, we concluded that the Johnson Program would be a good opportunity to further research the reading of Alvar Aalto in Spanish architectural magazines since 1960’s monograph in Arquitectura. From this to the second monograph, published in 1995 in Arquitectura Viva issue 66, more than forty articles and a number of books were published by Spanish architects and historians.

Antonio Fernandez-Alba and Antón Capitel should be highlighted. However, their readings differed for several reasons. The first one: the moments. They were completely different in terms of political and social conditions- a Regime in the 1960s, a Democracy the 1990s. The second: deepness and quantity (of the writings). Fernandez-Alba introduces Aalto to Spanish readers but he did it through
small essays that did not pretended to frame Aalto historically. Capitel, in contrast, published several
essays and books on Aalto becoming a specialized author on Aalto in Spanish language. The third:
the approaches. Fernández-Alba understood that any architects should be engage with the socio-
political problems of his time. Thus, he saw Aalto as a reference on this proposition and the reference
for his own architecture. In contrast, Capitel writings aim to elucidate and rationalise Aalto’s process of
design. Thus, he focuses on formal narratives and design strategies leaving in a second place the
social relevance of Aalto architecture.

This topic was proposed and accepted for the 2017 SAH Annual International Conference [6]. The aim
is to understand the significance of these interpretations for a deeper appreciation of Aalto’s influence
beyond Finland.

4 RESEARCH ON PIETILÄ

Professor Mäkela is an expert on Raili and Reima Pietilä’s works, as some publications show [8]. As
Johnson Visiting Scholar, it was possible to study the Pietilä’s trajectory following professor Mäkela
recommendations. After several meetings with professor Mäkelä, we concluded that two main articles
needed to be written: a first one with a historiographical scope, and a second article that presents a
comparison on Higuera and Pietilä’s work.

The first article should be a critical analysis of the main historiographical writings on Modern Spanish
Architecture published in the 1960s. Through these texts, the article should explain how Finnish
architecture was received and interpreted in Spain, and which architects were considered international
references. The article was recently published at The Journal of Architecture under the title “Writing
the History of Spanish Modern Architecture: Texts by Flores and Fullaondo from the 1960s” [7]. A
second article should study and compare the approach to architectural form of Pietilä and Higuera -
this article is still unpublished.

4.1 Links between research and teaching

As part of the Johnson Program, professor Pérez-Moreno and Mäkela had the opportunity to
supervise a Final Architecture Degree Thesis (FD-Thesis) developed by Diana Vega-López, an
architecture student from Zaragoza University in Spain. It was the first time that a FD-Thesis in
Architecture was co-supervised by an American and a Spanish Scholar at the University of Zaragoza.
The thesis focuses on Reima and Raili Pietilä’s design for Kaleva Church in Tampere (Finland), a
project built in the 1960s [8] “Fig.1.”

Pietilä’s work started with a conservative rationalism based on formal and graphical exploration. After
a while, their designs developed into an organicism based on personal expression and praise of local
values of Finnish Architecture Culture. Many historians agreed that Kaleva Church could be

![Figure 1. D. Vega-López, “El proceso de diseño en la obra de Raili y Reima Pietilä: Análisis de la Iglesia de
Kaleva (Tampere, Finlandia, 1966)”, Final Degree Thesis, Zaragoza University, 2016. Index.](image-url)
considered a turning point in their careers. It architectural form is totally different from Pietilä’s previous designs. Using this idea as a starting point, Vega-López’s Final Degree Thesis dealt with the analysis of the project in parallel with Reima Pietilä’s writings about morphology of expressive form - essentially published in *Le Carré Bleu*, “Fig.2”. She also analysed the value of Pietilä’s sketches as an extension of the architect’s thinking. The aim was to study the connection between those writings and his design for a Church in Kaleva (Tampere, Finland, 1966). The supervision was done online by weekly e-Tutoring hours. The result was impressive, and the supervisors and the student were gratefully to have this opportunity.


5 IDEAS TO IMPROVE THE PROGRAM

We think that for future visiting scholars the Johnson Program could be improved. We present here some ideas to do it:

1 Teaching. It would be good to teach a seminar related with the visiting scholar research.

2 Co-supervision. Independent Studies. We think that could be also a good teaching experience to co-supervise an Independent Study with a tenured professor of the CAP faculty. This experience could make the visiting scholar understand better the potential and particularities of the College of Architecture and Planning in comparison with his or her own experience.

3 Two Lectures by visiting scholars. In addition to the public lecture reporting on activities at the end of a visiting scholar’s tenure, it would be useful for a visiting scholar to give a lecture at the beginning to introduce to faculty and students his or her interests and research. This would help identify possible collaborative opportunities and synergies at the very beginning of a visiting scholar’s tenure.

4 Increase the visibility of the position as visiting scholar or fellow. The position as visiting scholar or fellow is a really good opportunity for teachers from other countries -especially those for whom English is not the mother tongue- to experience American higher education. Another way to increase the visibility of the position is by advertising it in scholar networks in art and architecture. Moreover, it would be valuable to create a website with a summary of the different scholars and their research that were at CAP.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the support of John Semple with the VISA J1 process. The work of Danielle Brunner was also very helpful in order to set my office space. Professor Phillip Gallegos’s support was most helpful in organizing my teaching and the use of CANVAS. Professor Mäkelä, as my faculty host,
was crucial to developing my research agenda and helping me with teaching methods in American universities. He was the one who made the Johnson Visiting Scholar opportunity a reality. We established ourselves as colleagues working together on a number of initiatives related to Spanish and Finnish architecture. A special gratitude goes to Don and Maria Johnson whose support made it all possible, and to Carl and Carla Hartman whose hospitality was fundamental for professor Pérez-Moreno stay in Denver. The sum is truly greater than the parts. Not only did we accomplish a great deal of research and gained invaluable experience in an American university, we also made many new friends for life, experienced the natural beauty of Colorado and the mighty Rocky Mountains. This overall experience has been foundational for all us as global scholars and educators.

REFERENCES


[3] Antonio Fernández-Alba (Salamanca, 1927) was a thirty-three years old talented architect educated in the School of Madrid (he finished the school in 1957) whose capacity took the attention of Carlos de Miguel (also an architect), editor in chief of that magazine. In the late 1960s and the 1970s, he became one of the most important architects in Spain.


