Variations in the residential work of Mariano García Benito. A terrace in Madrid
Eva Hurtado Torán

“The building’s common circulations are clear and differentiated, without intersections or complicated routes. Everything in this building brings together naturality, simplicity and quality finishes. A sober comfort without shrillness”. MGB

A young performer

There are authors who dedicate their lives to a theme, refining each work in nuances and reinterpretating their projects as one, like the great circular universes of Bach or Morandi, self-absorbed and profound, as if it were a unique production never fully deciphered. It seems that MGB liked to listen Bach while he was working. Perhaps he also admired Morandi. Perhaps all creative knowledge is part of a personal intellectual spiral.

MGB’s work can be read in terms of variations around transversal concepts and geometries. An enormous work, known in Madrid for its iconic pieces in the city, and representative of the generations of our architecture of the 50s. A quoted architect, whose substance, however, remains in the shadows.

He added the William Pereira Award to a brilliant university career at the Madrid School of Architecture, with several projects published, such as the one he carried out within the chair of Aníbal Alvarez and the prizes obtained in the contests for the “Inmaculada Concepción Temple” and for Prefabricated Housing in Madrid. The concise drawings of the university chapel dated 1956 synthesize “Miesian” lessons in a radical structural proposal consisting of fan-shaped braced trusses and glass cladings. A new language for religious architecture that is related to the “Chapel for the Camino de Santiago” contest that Francisco Javier Sáenz de Oiza and José Luis Romany had won in 1954. The design for the small Tourism Pavilion in collaboration with José María Fernández Piña confirms, from the ephemeral, the exaltation of the bare structural system that will reappear in later industrial warehouses and bus stations.

The prefabricated house awarded by TAFISA connects with Jean Prouvé’s ideas and the strict modulation of the domestic space. The metallic elements of the French industrialist are freshly approached by the Bosch, García Benito, and Feduchi team, who explore with determination the possibilities of the plywood board. A constructive project that explores the spatial nuances and the programmatic dimensions of the housing dwelling, in a certainly canonical exercise of post-war Modernity. All the determinants of the contest are adjusted to a house of 35 to 55 m² that does not resign the precise control of its technical installations. In 1956 Oiza’s academic handbooks on installations were published and the Experimental Housing Contest was built; a test on the constructive project assumptions that allow to meet the needs of affordable massive housing.

MGB is immersed in the arguments of international post-war architecture surrounding his graduation as an architect. The standardized measurements and the constructive module ensure programmatic precision, but also explain the spatial decisions and their geometries, in an identification that becomes the key to its architecture. He worked at the office of Francisco Asís Cabrero and, a few years later, he collaborated with Luis Gutiérrez Soto. With them, he had to learn about rigorous design systems and contemporary languages, but also from the contradictory mechanisms of the Spanish habitat at the time. The future “Cuoco IV” office building will become a refined prototype of this way of thinking about architecture that, however, is closely related to its housing projects at both ends of the social scale.

High-rise single-family homes

The Entrevistas settlement proposed by Sáenz de Oiza together with Alver翠riado and Sierra Nava between 1956 and 1960 represents the scalar metric as a design instrument. It is perhaps the earliest paradigm in Madrid of a grid able to solve territory, neighborhood, and room through a rhizome-like mat-building system. A grid that imprint a powerful character on Madrid’s southeastern periiphery shantytown, in whose successive phases other architects architecture expressions. Sáenz de Oiza was a central work of intense social character, and MGB was part of it, which confirms the ambivalence of the housing policies under Franco’s period in the careers of many professionals.

Behind the table at MGB’s first office, there was a model of the typical La Elipa neighborhood block unit, probably the first work he got to build. The team led by Manuel Ambrós, also including Alfonso Queireizeta and Eduardo García, remained the same for Entrevistas and Manoteras. Eight of the VRL blocks at La Elipa develop four duplexes on eight floors with access through a gallery on the facade. Its parallel layout avoided views into the “La Almudena” cemetery adjoining the plot. The duplexes are organized diagonally through parallel crossed stairs, so that the night area of one dwelling is located above the day area of its counterpart, alternating three and four bedroom-flats. At La Elipa’s semi-detached-units there is no collective program; the 20 commercial spaces are not housed in the blocks, nor are there any double-height spaces, but vertical cores are economized, thus minimizing the lack of privacy of the corridor and optimizing the interiors. Already in the Manoteras neighborhood, duplexes had been built over commercials, as in Orcasitas, to maximize the options of single-family home stacking. This principle of dense city where the housing unit continues to explore, provides a variant of the modern free-standing block that introduces collective programs of circulation and, often, community uses; a type that in Spain reappears in new-town environments.

Based on the Soviet model’s tradition, or on the so-called “Casa Bloco” at domestic level, housing units had already been designed for “La Ciudad Verde” in Alameda de Osuna, by Manuel Manzoni Monis in 1952, and the set of 600 dwellings at the river Manzanares development, by Oiza, Romany, Sierra and Milczinsky in 1953. All of them were architects linked to El Hologar del Empleado (HE - The Worker’s Home), who were researching on experimental housing and were involved in the first Poblados Dirigidos (State-led New-Towns) in Madrid. Both of the mentioned housing units remained on paper until the construction of the “Calero” block, a work from 1955 by the latter team, which was the HE’s Technical Office incorporating Luis Cubillo. In Barcelona, the “Escorial” Residential Group built in 1952 had one of its nullplexes served by galleries with a free-standing sculptural vertical core: Alemany, Bohigas, Martorell, Mitjans, Perpiñá, Ribas Piera and Ribas Casas signed it. In Palma de Mallorca, Gutiérrez Soto designed the “Lux” Apartments next to the “Fénix” Hotel and in Valencia, Santiago Artal Ríos designed the “Santa Maria Micaela” Housing Group, both in 1958. And later, the five blocks of “El Taray” that José Joaquín Aracil began to build in Segovia in 1962; the Bilbao-based Pedro “Astigarraga” Group, also called “The American houses”, built by Basáñez, Argárate and Larrea in 1963 and the “Elvíña” Group in A Coruña, built by José Antonio Corrales in 1965. This type of residential unit, a series that was controversial and never easy, continues to appear nowadays in contemporary residential architecture by Kazuyo Sejima and her associates (KSD), or WOQ, VVRDV or Tatiana Bilbao, among others. All of them emulate the city-block and look up to Le Corbusier’s models built in Europe and replicated in Latin America. With obvious limitations in the Spain of scarcity, the authors try, however, to broaden the standards of row groupings and four-five floor blocks without a lift that the Regime so insistently recommended. Carlos Flores wrote in 1966 about these unique projects: “[…] a common concern, the desire of their authors to provide them with areas (outside the houses, but inside the building) that could be used as places for communication and coexistence. These solutions range from a large-scale approach to equally exemplary minimal strategies. In all of them, there is the same intention to foster a sense of community, the same concern for the individuals who are going to occupy them”. These words are the clearest intentioned eagerness to widen the regulations and programmatic limits that official Spain imposed, whose sociological assumptions were also ambitious architectural utopias.

The 50’s came to an end and MGB continued to work on the ubisidell Dwellings in Sancho Dávila (1957) and “Nuestra Señora de Begoña” in Villaverde (1958).
A terrace in Madrid

Luis Gutiérrez Soto claimed that the Madrid terrace had been his invention. And he underlined the differences between the traditional balcony and the new verdant spaces on the heights understood as a living room. Master and disciple, as it has already been said, collaborated in the building on Velázquez Street.

MGB curriculum shows 33 built collective housing projects, most of them in Madrid. The “Luz” building is a super-block from 1960 at the plot located at the intersection between General Pardiñas 112-114 and General Oraá 53. An initial project where abstraction and lightness are staged by opaque stone slabs and transparent glass panes. The dwellings are replicated without differences between those with exterior facing and the ones at the interior of the block, with a longitudinal interior patio only interrupted by the stair cores and its molded glass walls. Natural light is optimized, and the ample day area is prioritized, with the possibility of completely opening its front façade. The living space becomes a large terrace thanks to the sliding enclosure capable of converting it into a winter garden; a theme defended by Lacaton & Vassal in their contemporary interventions on existing buildings. In the “Luz” building everything is modulated, the construction subtly determines the dimensions of the needs of the functional program and light-weight envelopes promise different summers and winters. The careful design of the entrances is typical of MGB’s work within the prevailing culture of minimal common spaces of social housing. Arcadio Blasco collaborated in the entrance’s mural paintings, where wall panelings and furniture design are integrated.

The entire collective housing work of MGB could be explained by talking about the terraces, those “open spaces” that provide void, projected with attention to the measure and detail of its materiality. The presence of each other and accentuate their uniqueness through two more elements: the V-shaped structure that supports the corner of the ground floor and the landscaped terrace on top of the roof of the commercial spaces of this plinth. The continuous proposal of prefabricated parapets that connect with the vertical core, is tested in these three cases in pairs around the vertical cores. In the background, a north-south oriented flat block closes the square formed by two staggered bodies oriented east-west. Facing the street, the non-existent fourth side is a canopy that filters and announces the interior garden while protecting its privacy. The city is built with a naturalized void, projected with attention to the measure and detail of its materiality. The terraces knit the twists facing this central space and are once again the protagonists due to their way of chaining the pieces with diagonal edges. As in the continuous terraces of the houses between party walls, while the open spaces propose the dissolution of the dwelling units, and as there, the choice of its variable depths particularizes and enriches the look of each flat.

The volume movement, with several twists and turns, generates four very different sides and two dwellings per floor: one with three terraces in a very pronounced staggering of the main rooms facing the López de Hoyos boulevard; the other with a single terrace at an angle that embraces the main space of the house. Both are pieces of a sophisticated and powerful design series, disturbingly similar but extremely different with sheer white prefabricated parapets that connect with the ledge of the lower deck.

In the following years, the commissions of this project series followed one another, many of them for the developer Juan Obregón, for whom he also built his single-family home in La Moraleja. Thus, one can follow the path of variations in Goya 107 (1961), García Morato 10-12 and Londres 8 (1962), María de Molina 22 and Doctor Esquerdo 18 (1963), María de Miralles 47 (1964), Francisco Silvela 79 and 81 (1965), to cite just a few examples of collective, bourgeois and urban housing that allowed MGB to test the complex equation of modern architecture and upper class in a dismal epoch in our country.

The canon and the tower

At Avenida de América number 35, a corner block completes the residential plot. At number 37 stands the “Torres Blancas” building by Sáenz de Oiza, built in 1963 and 1964 respectively. Dwellings look at each other on both sides of Padre Xirfé street. One is the canon of Madrid’s bourgeois housing; the other was, and still is, an immense singularity for the architecture of the city, if it transcends the issue of collective housing. MGB develops an apparently minor project with an intelligent floor plan of apartments on a very deep plot, and skillfully leverages the span lengths within the available bay width. The nuances for each orientation and the larger units adjacent to the party walls solve floor plans and elevations. These are small dwellings that function as residential types of great versatility which, looking back over the years, seem to have little to improve in terms of precise matching between space organization and sociological program for a certain urban middle class. The democratization of luxury housing or the program of the house without servants are issues that mark the decade’s transition. MGB’s towers for the headquarters of Philips Ibérica (1964) and “Cuzco IV” (1974) are well known. Both have the same scheme regarding the towers’ floor plan, although the constructive solution evolves enormously between one and the other. A decade separates them, and both possibly have their origin in the tower built in collaboration with Gutiérrez Soto in 1963.

84 homes and commercial spaces constitute a jagged bow that turns the corner between Velázquez 136-138 and López de Hoyos into a relevant urban event, with the contribution of a powerful horizontal plinth. The pieces enhance each other and accentuate their uniqueness through two more elements: the V-shaped structure that supports the corner of the ground floor and the landscaped terrace on top of the roof of the commercial spaces of this plinth. The continuous proposal of prefabricated parapets that connect with the vertical core, is tested in these three cases in pairs around the vertical cores. The intersection of parallel pieces that slide, as if pushed by a shear around the vertical core, is tested in these three projects and refined by adding complexity to an invariant in MGB’s work. It will be in “Cuzco IV” where shearing becomes the sole design theme functioning as seed, as built reality and as the logo of a culminating piece for the architect’s work. And perhaps MGB, the leading role of its angular beam due to the staggering volumes and programmatic segregation are concerned, achieving strong visual references at points of circulatory articulation. Both buildings function as urban landmarks.
“Cuzco IV” also stands out in relation to the single-family housing projects and the school complexes to which he dedicated a large part of his work.

Living sober and without fanfare. In conclusion

In the legacy images stored from MGB’s successive offices, the result of his work can be seen with large photographs hanging on the walls. Very beautiful images speak of a story confirmed by the plenty of close views and hand-drawn perspectives, on top of technical plans and other archive files. In the detail of the example that the architect nurtures and builds is another way of studying his work, where the domestic becomes abstract without losing its function. His figure emerges as an exponent of the 50s and 60s architecture, linking to architects whose work spanned between autarchy and developmentalism, and between bourgeois housing and the enormous post-war social initiative. This allows us to decipher records about their training, their international references in the drifts of the Modern Movement, and their professional development, which is fundamentally solitary in nature. Perhaps among them, Luis Cubillo and Eleuterio Población would allow us to venture parallels and coincidences, although there are many others, not so close to the Madrid School group, and certainly relegated to oblivion by part of the critics. The careful details by MGB are manifested in all of his works: the finishings in shops and commercial spaces, with textures, wall panelings, and specific lighting systems, as well as in the furniture for school environments to which he remarkably devoted himself. They are also confirmed in the interiors of a few organic elements, with exceptions such as the upper floor of the San José Sanatorium Chapel, as well as the screens in the lobby of the Imperial Cinema, the Phillips offices, or his bus stations and hotels for travelers.

To end this brief tour through the work of MGB, a block of flats in Madrid is brought into focus to show the pleasure of collective realities. These examples shared their nuances enrich an architecture that goes unnoticed, because nothing in it draws too much attention, although its relevance and rigor make it friendly as soon as we look at it carefully. Its floor plan can be read as a synthesis of MGB’s work, who designed without shilliness, but with polite forcefulness and a radical way of making city alike. And the winners are, without doubt, the terraces at the ship bow, large and deep, like a manifesto, developed parallel to the street and advancing enormously from the façade in a representation of the very concept of the open space within the city with its own life. We observe them and inevitably we yearn to live there.

Biography

PhD in Architecture (UPM). Professor of Architectural Design (UEM) and at present in ESNE. Participant in AIR-LAB research team. She is Principal Researcher of DENSURB project on residential density. She develops publications on architecture 20th century, avant-garde, periodicals and Madrid database of the 21st century. She is curator of Arquitectas Series, Fundación Arquitectura COAM, where she collaborates with Legacies of Modern Architecture Series, origin of the presented article. She heads a professional practice related to interventions on Modern Movement architectures and residential renovation.
Mariano García Benito, “Edificio de apartamentos en Avenida de América 35” y “Edificio de viviendas y locales comerciales en Madrid”, Arquitectura no. 91 (July 1966): 5 y 8-9 respectively.

28. MGB’s American affiliation can be traced to his numerous trips and to the William L. Pereira scholarship, which probably made possible his collaboration in the Technical Office of the Misión Americana en España for a year. Also due to his relationship with Luis Vázquez de Castro, the architect who introduced “Americanism” in school buildings. Gordon Bunshaft’s Lever House publication appeared in RNA in early 1955, the same issue in which MGB published his first work as a student (see Footnote 4).


27. MGB’s work on school buildings is widely published in Revista Nacional de Arquitectura, Hogar y Arquitectura, Arquitectura y Informes de la Construcción. The one for single-family homes is made up of 22 works built according to their curricular summary.

28. The photographers Portillo and Luis Andriani, who worked for architects, sign numerous images of their work that are stored at COAM Legacy, Alfonso Segovia has emphasized the relationship between MGB Fund and architectural photography.


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