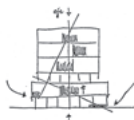


# Pioneros de la Arquitectura Moderna Española: La arquitectura como obra integral

Pioneers of Modern Spanish Architecture:  
Architecture as inclusive work

Coordinación - Coordination  
Teresa Couceiro Núñez



FUNDACIÓN ALEJANDRO DE LA SOTA

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# El arte de la discreción Casa de Suecia en Madrid

The art of discretion  
Casa de Suecia in Madrid

**Amarouch García, Ismael**

Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, Departamento de Proyectos Arquitectónicos,  
Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid, España, [paraisma@gmail.com](mailto:paraisma@gmail.com)

**Resumen:** A mediados de los años 50, mientras lleva la dirección de las obras de la Embajada de los Estados Unidos en el Paseo de la Castellana, el arquitecto Mariano Garrigues Díaz-Cañabate recibe el encargo por parte de la colonia sueca residente en Madrid –con el apoyo de las autoridades suecas y españolas y la colaboración de importantes firmas comerciales de ambos países–, de construir la Casa de Suecia; un edificio que, además de hotel de viajeros, sucursal comercial de la embajada y centro de tertulias, fuera la mejor representación de la cultura escandinava.

En la Casa de Suecia se pueden aprender tres lecciones del buen arte de la discreción: raíz, construcción y vida. La raíz alude a la manera en la que un edificio moderno se asienta dentro de la estructura histórica de una ciudad. El solar era contiguo al Círculo de Bellas Artes y, anteriormente a la construcción de éste último, formaba parte de la extensión de uno de los dos jardines del palacio del marqués de Casa Riera. El nuevo proyecto adopta una posición de respeto con el edificio institucional vecino y como contrapunto de ese jardín que ahora tiene frente a él, entendiéndose el emplazamiento como un conjunto armonioso en el que nada se impone, y sí se busca establecer una sutil conversación en el espacio y en el tiempo.

La complejidad y variedad del programa de las catorce plantas, llevó a la elección de un sistema constructivo que permitiera una gran flexibilidad en la distribución interior: una estructura de gran diafanidad de acero laminado, calculada y diseñada por Eduardo Torroja, al que Garrigues había conocido, algunos años antes, en las obras para la Ciudad Universitaria. No hay, sin embargo, en este edificio una exhibición al exterior de la técnica constructiva que lo hace posible, y sí un entendimiento de la ordenación del espacio que ejercen estos pilares cuando aparecen exentos en el gran vestíbulo de entrada.

El edificio, como casa que es, se sitúa como un elemento conciliador entre el hombre y la naturaleza preexistente en la ciudad; así lo manifiesta su fachada, concebida como una piel con un haz exterior diferente de su envés interior. La vida colectiva se desarrolla, en el espacio confinado entre estas paredes exteriores, con los mejores materiales y el mobiliario que la industria sueca podía ofrecer, no tanto por su elevado coste, como por su deseo de autenticidad y confort, haciendo buena la máxima que propició el avance del diseño escandinavo en la primera mitad del siglo XX: buenos artículos cotidianos.

La Casa de Suecia permitió a Garrigues, pionero en acercar lo nórdico al discurso de la arquitectura moderna española, poner en práctica lo que él había estudiado y tanto admiraba de la arquitectura escandinava, y de una obra en particular: la Ampliación del Ayuntamiento de Gotemburgo de Erik Gunnar Asplund.

**Palabras clave:** discreción, casa, suecia, garrigues, asplund.

**Summary:** In the mid-1950s, while he oversees the works of the United States Embassy on the Paseo de la Castellana, the architect Mariano Garrigues Díaz-Cañabate was commissioned, by the Swedish colony resident in Madrid –support from the Swedish and Spanish authorities and the collaboration of important commercial firms from both countries–, to build the Casa de Suecia; a mixed building that, besides being a hotel, a commercial branch of the embassy and a center for social gatherings, must be the best representation of the Scandinavian culture.

In the Casa de Suecia three lessons can be learned from the good art of discretion: roots, construction and life. The roots allude to the way in which a modern building sits within the historical structure of a city. The site is next to the Círculo de Bellas Artes, taking the place of one of the two gardens of the Palacio del Marqués de Casa Riera. The new project takes a respect position with the adjoining institutional building and with the garden that came before it. The site is understood as a harmonious whole in which nothing is imposed, and it is sought to establish a subtle conversation in the space and time.

For solve the complex program, developed in fourteen floors, it was chosen a constructive system that ensure a high flexibility from domestic spaces: a very light rolled steel structure by the engineer Eduardo Torroja, whom Garrigues had known, some years before, in the works for the Ciudad Universitaria. However, in this building, there is not an exhibition of technique that makes it possible, save for the exempt columns in the great entrance building hall.

The building, as house that is, is the keystone between man and the preexisting nature in the city; that's evident in its facade, conceived as a skin with an outer different from its inner surface. Collective life unfolds in the space confined between these exterior walls, with the best materials and furniture that the Swedish industry could offer, not so much for its high cost, as for a real longing for authenticity and comfort, making good the maximum that led to the advance of Scandinavian design in the first half of the 20th century: good everyday articles.

The Casa de Suecia allowed Garrigues, a pioneer in bringing the Nordic lessons to the modern Spanish architecture, put into practice what he had studied and looked up in the Scandinavian architecture and in a particular work: the Gothenburg City Hall Extension by Erik Gunnar Asplund.

**Keywords:** discretion, casa, suecia, garrigues, asplund.

The study will obviate the reforms in the wrong way that, in two stages during the 1980s and more recently with its acquisition by NH Hotel Group, mainly affected its refined interior design. It will be taken, therefore, as if it remained intact, as it was conceived by Garrigues: a piece destined to keep “as long as it takes, until it can show, in the long run, an eternal vitality”<sup>3</sup>.

## Roots – The meaning of site

Of about 700 square meters, the plot of land belonged to the old big property of Marqués de Casa Riera, which it was bordered, on its north side, with Alcalá Street, on its east side, with Turco Street, on its south side, with Greda Street and to its west side, with the city block where other buildings are located [FIG. 2].

In the number 64 of Alcalá Street, there was the palace that gave name to the property. Built at the beginning of the 19th century, on the remains of the house-palace of the Conde de Miranda, it was, in the first instance, owned by the Duquesa of Abrantes and renamed as the “Casa de los Alfileres”<sup>4</sup>. Felipe, I Marqués de Riera, bought the estate on behalf of his wife, Raimunda Gibert, in the 1930s. A few years later, he settled in Paris and the palace was left empty until, in 1890, Alejandro, II Marqués de Riera and Felipe’s nephew, pulled down it and he raised another one. Oddly enough, he never lived in this palace.

The palace, with a rectangular base, was an exempt three storey building with a central courtyard. The main entrance was formerly located on Alcalá Street, through a door of three spans in the wall of a first and spacious garden of the adjoining plot; in the place that it was occupied by the old Convento de las Baronesas –or Convento de las Carmelitas Recoletas–, that it was seized in 1853. There were also a garage and services quarters in the south of the land. It seems that both of them were communicated with the palace through a mysterious subterranean gallery. Between the two buildings there was a second and extensive landscaped garden, which it contrasted with the strict trace of a palace that, always closed, became a sad legend<sup>5</sup>.

In 1917, Marqués de Casa Riera Street was opened, and then it was celebrated a competition for a new Círculo de Bellas Artes, in the place of the first garden, next to Alcalá Street. After the first prize, awarded to the Eugenio Fernández Quintanilla and Secundino Zuazo’s project, was appealed, the architect Antonio Palacios, who was one of the promoters of the contest, had to give up his fees, in order to build it, between 1921 and 1926, even though his proposal wasn’t chosen in the first phase of the competition, because of an excessive volume<sup>6</sup>.

On the site of the old palace, some years later, another one was built. From 1940 to 1977, it was a seat of the Spanish government, taking advantage of a good visibility from Alcalá Street. In 1990 it was transformed into the current office building. Nowadays, of those two gardens, there is only one

**FIG. 3** Vista de la medianera libre de Círculo de Bellas Artes hacia 1930. En *Los palacios de la Castellana: historia, arquitectura y sociedad*, p.102. Archivo AGA.  
View of the boundary wall of Círculo de Bellas Artes about 1930. En *Los palacios de la Castellana: historia, arquitectura y sociedad*, p.102. Archivo AGA.



in existence, but in geometric style, surrounded by a wall, and with the entrance through Marqués de Casa Riera Street.

For 30 years, the adjacent site to the Círculo was vacant, and a 40 meters of a high boundary wall for cover up [FIG. 3]. A building here had to overcome a double challenge. On the one hand, it was supposed to save the scale difference between the Alcalá Street and Madrazo Street –old Greda Street–; on the other, and consequently, to grow up in a small size place.

There is, at least, one project not built on this site [FIG. 4], signed in June 1945 by the architect Eduardo Lagarde: a cinema with 631 seats, entrance by Marqués de Casa Riera Street and exit by Madrazo Street. The project was completed with a bar in the basement, shops on the ground floor, offices in the six floors above ground, and a penthouse for the janitor. Although the building won't be rise, both its organization around a central courtyard and the varied of its program in section, serve us as a precedent of the Casa de Suecia.

In this work, above all, there is an unbridled love to improve the city; how it hands over its prominent role to the Círculo, a building that was previously there, and in its will to form a harmonious whole, where the palace estate feels like a superior order to which everything should be secondary. Under this hypothesis, we could say that the entrance ritual does not begin directly at the foot of the building, but much earlier; at the cross between Alcalá Street and Marqués de Casa Riera Street. Over there, you can imagine a virtual door that opens to a more private and preparatory way of what the action of going through, from an outside to an inside, deserves. The Casa de Suecia is, therefore, a modern palace that, unlike the old one with facade to the Alcalá Street, stands in a discreet background.

Both the empathy to establish a cordial relationship, in time and space, with the place, as the elegant and subtle connection with the adjoining institutional building, allow us to make an initial assessment of this work, taking together with the Asplund's building in Gothenburg, in all the load of meaning that the site reaches in any architectural project.

## Construction – The integration of crafts

In the Casa de Suecia, this attachment seems to be materialized in the idea of a buttress built for the Círculo. A containment that is not only formal, but also attends to the scale and arrangement of the all hollows, equal and equidistant from each other, as a continuous vertical wall that, although perforated, shows its opposition –and therefore its respect– to the garden it now faces [FIG. 5].

Very close to there, Garrigues could keep his eyes on two buildings of the late 20s. The first would be the Edificio de la Unión y el Fénix<sup>7</sup>. One of the premises of the project, signed in 1928 by the architect

**FIG. 4** Sección y planta de proyecto de edificio para Agromán Empresa Constructora S.A. en el solar del Marqués de Casa Riera, esquina a Los Madrazo (1945). Archivo de la Villa: exp.991/428/089/826.  
Section and plan of a building project for Agromán Empresa Constructora S.A., in the site of Marqués de Casa Riera, corner with Los Madrazo (1945). Archivo de la Villa: exp.991/428/089/826.

**FIG. 5** Alzado, a la calle del Marqués de Casa Riera, de la Casa de Suecia y del Círculo de Bellas Artes. Dibujo elaborado por el autor.  
Elevation for the Casa de Suecia and Círculo de Bellas Artes. Drawing by the author.



para una posterior flexibilidad en la distribución interior de la planta. Un sistema que, cabe señalar, es similar al que Asplund había utilizado en Gotemburgo y que, al igual que aquí, produce, en su ligereza, un ejercicio de contraste con el edificio contiguo.

Rememorando el tapiz del vestíbulo principal del edificio de Asplund, con las iniciales inscritas de todos aquellos que colaboraron en la obra, la construcción de la Casa de Suecia no se agota con una airosa traza en planta o con el planteamiento en sección de una moderna y eficiente estructura levantada en apenas siete meses. Es de destacar la colaboración entre firmas comerciales suecas y españolas, combinando materiales de importación con artesanías locales. Entre los primeros, los más relevantes fueron el acero inoxidable, empleado sin llegar al abuso, principalmente en puertas, ventanas, ascensores, barandillas y rodapiés; y la madera de caoba para los acabados y carpinterías interiores. La industria española, si bien no era tan pujante como la de otros países, sí comenzaba a despegar, merced a la apertura comercial que el país estaba experimentando a partir de los años cincuenta. Así, junto al acero y la madera, aparece el suelo continuo de terrazo, el acristalamiento con "luna pulida Cristañola" o la instalación de alfombras, cortinajes y moquetas de fabricación nacional. Por último, a la instalación general de calefacción, se le unieron equipos de acondicionamiento de aire, para la climatización interior tanto de los espacios colectivos abiertos de las plantas inferiores, como de las dependencias privadas, despachos y dormitorios, de las superiores.

### Vida: la arquitectura como paseo

El edificio se concibió como una gran casa colectiva que alojaría el símbolo de las incipientes relaciones comerciales entre España y Suecia. Cuando el príncipe Bertil inauguró la obra en 1956, sorprendido, se le oyó decir: "quien haya hecho este edificio, ha sabido comprender la esencia de



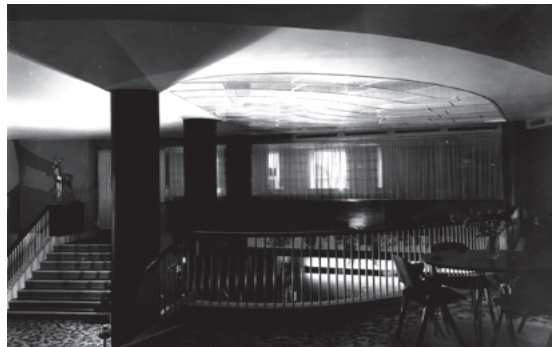


without the presence of the *Círculo de Bellas Artes*, side by side, but in the same way the *Círculo* seems to need the *Casa de Suecia* as a means of channeling all its energy [FIG. 6].

The structural grid, between 4 y 6 meters<sup>11</sup>, traces geometrically a plan shaped like an irregular rectangle (22.7 x 27.3 x 29.8 x 27.7 meters) with the corner resolved in chamfer. There is an inner courtyard, also irregular, and two other small backyards next to the boundary wall of the *Círculo de Bellas Artes*. Each support is shaped by two UPN profiles reinforced with metal platforms. On its central axis of each one, a beam of tubular section is holded. Each beam is shaped, also, by two UPN profiles, and, on them, some IPE profiles are arranged every 80 centimeters [FIG. 7].

The other section of the *Casa de Suecia* reveals a multi-purpose building of fourteen floors [FIG. 8], with three of them below street level. The choice of this structural system was decisive for a later flexibility in the space design, like the *Asplund's building*, in Gothenburg. Both, in its levity, create a contrast with the other buildings close to them.

Recalling the tapestry of the main hall of the *Asplund's building*, with the initials inscribed by all those who collaborated in the work, the construction of the *Casa de Suecia* is not enough with an airy floor plan or the choice of a modern and efficient structure lifted in just seven months. It should also be stressed the collaboration between Swedish and Spanish trading houses, combining imported materials with local handicrafts. Among the first ones, the most relevant were stainless steel, used sparingly, mainly in doors, windows, elevators, railings and skirts; and mahogany wood for interior finishes and carpentry. Although the Spanish industry wasn't a strong economy as other countries, it had begun to take off, due to the trade openness in the 50s. That is why, along with steel and wood, it was used a continuous terrazzo flooring, glazing of windows with "luna pulida Cristañola" or carpets, curtains and carpeted floors from domestic manufacture. Finally, to the general heating installation, air conditioning equipment was added, both the open collective spaces of the lower floors, as well as the private offices of the upper ones.



**FIG. 9** Entrada principal a la Casa de Suecia, desde la calle del Marqués de Casa Riera. Servicio Histórico, Fundación Arquitectura COAM: MGD/F009.  
Main entrance to the Casa de Suecia from Marqués de Casa Riera Street. Servicio Histórico, Fundación Arquitectura COAM: MGD/F009.



**FIG. 10** Vestíbulo, en la planta baja, de la Casa de Suecia. Servicio Histórico, Fundación Arquitectura COAM: MGD/F008.  
Entrance hall at the ground floor of the Casa de Suecia. Servicio Histórico, Fundación Arquitectura COAM: MGD/F008.

**FIG. 11** Salón del hotel, en la entreplanta inferior, de la Casa de Suecia. Servicio Histórico, Fundación Arquitectura COAM: MGD/F008.  
Hotel lounge at the lower mezzanine floor of the Casa de Suecia. Servicio Histórico, Fundación Arquitectura COAM: MGD/F008.