

“It is not geniuses we need”

By
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Illustration
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OVER 20 YEARS AGO I had the opportunity of moving to live in Chicago, thanks to an offer of work from a firm of architects with operations in several cities of the United States. Years afterwards I decided to become independent and open my own office in the windy city. Even though nowadays our work is concentrated primarily in Latin America, I came to consider Chicago a second birthplace; I was born there as an architect and return each year, in summer, for several weeks with my three children, who have now also adopted the city.

Today, along one of the avenues of the city, not being in much of a hurry nor with a definite destination, I found myself in a street which ends at the river; the sidewalks clean as in few places and the summer breeze which helps you to forget the drastic conditions which Winter could bring. At that moment, I remembered an article I read close to 20 years ago and which has remained with me as a reflection ever since.

In 1961, Domus magazine published a short article by the Spanish architect José Antonio Coderch entitled: It is not geniuses we need now. The article, which came to my hands by chance in 1996 when I was beginning my career, is a criticism of the manner of teaching architecture which subsequently determines to a great extent the form in which architects go out to exercise their profession.

At the beginning of the article, Coderch recalls the anecdote of an old and famous American architect who, if I remember correctly, told another much younger colleague who asked his advice: “Open your eyes wide, look, it is much simpler than you imagine”. He also said: “Behind every building you see there is a man you don’t see.” A man; he didn’t even say an architect.



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It is extremely important that the thousands of architects out there in the world think more about their profession and less about money.

Coderch reflected how, at almost every school of architecture, they teach us to admire the “brilliance” of the famous architects, but little is done to understand the ethical and moral values of a good architect.

I remember that, over 20 years ago, the first time I read the article I was surprised at how up to date it could be despite being almost 40 years (at that time) after the date of publication. Today I read it again, and was again surprised; more than 60 years afterwards, the greater part of architectural schools continues in a very similar tone, and therefore many graduates leave with the idea of becoming the next architectural genius.

Coderch was convinced that geniuses are events, not goals, and insists in his article that it is not geniuses we need, but rather that the thousands of architects designing throughout the

world should think less of architecture with a capital A; in money, or in the city of the future, and more in their profession.

Chicago reminds me of this idea of the architecture of geniuses versus that of the unknown architect who has passion and honesty. Chicago, the playground of the famous Mies Van Der Rohe who, it should be clarified, did not study architecture and didn’t even finish high school; this city to a great extent is made up of Parts designed by hundreds of “men behind the building”, few of the buildings of Chicago are the result of the work of “geniuses”. What Van Der Rohe managed to put forward was this concept originally raised by St. Agustín: “Beauty is the manifestation of truth”, which he invested in the architecture of each one of his works.

In this way, strolling through this city, I always remember the words of Coderch: “It is not geniuses we need now”, and ask myself how many more decades will have to pass in order to stop looking for geniuses in architecture. g

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