



LA CULTURA Y LA CIUDAD

JUAN CALATRAVA
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(eds.)

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Y
LA CIUDAD

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BARCELONA AND DONOSTIA-SAN SEBASTIÁN TO THE EYES
OF A BAUHAUSLER: URBAN LIFE IN THE PHOTO COLLAGES
OF JOSEF ALBERS

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«Viva Mies». That shortly, and in Spanish, is how Josef and Anni Albers congratulated Mies van der Rohe on his 80th birthday.¹ The Alberses may have always reminded Mies related to Spain, since it was in the Barcelona Pavilion they visited in August 1929, where Josef Albers found —architecturally materialized— many of the tectonic explorations he had developed during the 1920s.

Albers's glass paintings were a personal research project he developed according to the tectonic concerns of the times, in parallel to the work of his contemporary architects.² Glass was the medium, but Albers's tectonic studies surpassed the composition of windows and enclosing systems. Beyond analysing openings, they showed how modern architecture had achieved the complete continuity of space, distinguishing the supporting elements from those responsible for setting spatial limits.

In Mies's pavilion, Albers must have experienced the distinction between the enclosure and the structure he had expressed in «Frontal» (1927), the interior-exterior transparency he had revealed in «Interlocked» (1927), as well as the dematerialization of supporting elements of «Walls and Screens» (1928). It is no coincidence that Mies and Albers, whether in buildings or glass paintings, both tried to surpass the anatomical condition of architecture during the 1920s.

As Albers, Mies had also dematerialized the building supports in 1928, when he designed his cruciform chrome pillars, which were able to extend material reflection in four infinite cardinal directions. In the Barcelona Pavilion, Mies had led to an extreme the ambivalence and multiplicity of meanings that Albers played with, impeding the distinction between the supporting parts and those delimiting the pavilion.

The large wall composed by two panes of white glass must have created a great impression to Albers since, when looking together at the glass paintings of monochrome

1. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, *Private Correspondence, Telegram sent by the Alberses, March 27, 1966*. Box 4, Birthday Correspondence, 1966. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

2. In a conversation with Katherine Kuh in 1962, Albers explained there was an architectural element in his work, and that for a long time he had «used window as a theme.» *The Artist's Voice: Talks with Seventeenth Artists by Katharine Kuh*, New York, Harper & Row, 1962, pp. 11-22.

bands he created in 1929, and at the view of Mies's Pavilion from the pond, the influence seems quite shocking. Especially if we observe that Albers produced different versions of this work, in which, beyond a relative positioning of the windows, the mullions change in colour; from black, white, and grey, up to merging together with the background. In truth, creating different versions of the same painting was the only way to represent reflection—and therefore the changing colour of chrome—in a medium such as the glass painting, in which colour cannot be modulated.

1. THE MEDITERRANEAN PYRENEES

To see the Barcelona Pavilion may have been one of the reasons for Josef and Anni Albers to travel from Central Europe to the Mediterranean Sea in 1929. However, in all probability, the motivation was also to visit the two sections of the German Exhibits of the Barcelona International Fair in which the Bauhaus was present: the Palace of Decorative and Industrial Arts and the Palace of Textile Industries, both designed in partnership between Mies and Lilly Reich.³ The interior spaces of the two palaces were ground breaking in terms of the design of exhibition spaces. However, and surprisingly, Albers did not record any of these modern interiors, nor the Barcelona Pavilion itself. Instead, he captured several other elements of Spanish popular culture, which he later composed in the form of collage.

The first photo collage from Barcelona, of a single image, is from Albers's visit to the Exhibition Grounds of the International Fair. It represents a lining up of various rows of wicker-chairs, which permeated all the representative spaces and the main axis of the fair grounds. These kinds of chairs were in clear contrast to the pieces of furniture in chrome tube that were part of Mies's pavilion and the German industrial exhibits. The «still-lives» composed by Mies's MR series invaded the different German industrial sections; the Barcelona chair also had a significant presence at the Barcelona Pavilion. However, Albers seemed to be much more interested in the wicker-chairs that expressed a economy of form, very much aligned with his teaching and material explorations at the Bauhaus.

The second photo collage from Barcelona composes two images of the interior patio of the block of the hotel where the Albers stayed (Fig. 1). It was the Hotel Colón, a popular building of the beginning of the 20th century, located in the north-west side of Plaza Catalunya. The hotel was part of the urban tissue of the 19th century extension of Ildefonso Cerdá, a very idiosyncratic fabric of the Catalan city, characterized by big blocks with ample opened patios. The huge extension of the *Eixample*, as well as the richness and variety of its plots, must have called the attention of Albers, since he was very much interested in capturing the life of the modern city, as the work «City» (1928) suggests.

Albers made two photographs from the window of his room towards the interior patio of the block. The image on the left reveals an unmistakable Mediterranean architecture, with several elements to protect the windows from the sun. In the east, a collective dwelling

3. The Bauhaus was listed as an industry in the Palace of Decorative and Industrial Arts and the Palace of Textile Industries. Box 47174, Expo 1929, Inventari objectos de artes, Arxiu Contemporani de Barcelona. It should be remembered that, at that time, Anni Albers was still a student of the Bauhaus weaving workshop and some of her own work—or that of her professors or classmates—may have been on view.

opens towards the patio through a glazed gallery covered with shutters and lattices. The ground level of the entire patio is occupied by different commercial extensions, and some of them are protected with subsequent bands of long horizontal pergolas.

Sigfried Giedion, who stayed in the same hotel three years later, and that we can see in an image taken by José Manuel Aizpurua, described the interior space of the block as «the most lively patio [he] had ever seen». ⁴ Giedion ironically explained that the glazed galleries of the main facades of buildings in provincial cities had been «exiled» into the rear facades in Barcelona's patios. And for this reason, he thought the most original city of the world would be created, should the houses of these blocks of Barcelona be rotated in 180°. Giedion explained the Arabic origin and the long tradition of these glazed constructions, and lamented seeing how the Spanish architecture of the 19th century had not relied on the state of the art technology to further develop these traditional windows. According to him, this was a missed opportunity, which had impeded to develop the cultural bonds of Spaniards by means of architecture.

Albers had started taking photographs in 1928 as a medium of representation that allowed him to isolate the abstract condition of objects and nature, in order to later extrapolate them to his paintings, drawings and non-objective impressions. And this is precisely what he did with Barcelona's photographs once he was back at the Bauhaus, when he developed «Pergola» (1929), in which we can see a strong influence of Mediterranean architecture, and in particular, of the horizontal elements for shadow production he captured in Barcelona. At the same time, «Bowers» (1929) represented another Mediterranean typical element for shadow production, and its texture may even remind us the wicker fabric of the chairs of the International Exhibition.

2. THE ATLANTIC PYRENEES

Josef and Anni Albers continued their trip to Barcelona through the Franco-Spanish border, up to the Atlantic Pyrenees, to meet Paul Klee and Vasily Kandinsky, who spent over a month there on holiday. ⁵

Two photographs, which show a dazzling reflection of sunlight into the water, stand out among the many images Albers took in Biarritz. It is not difficult to think that these photographs helped Albers exploring the degrees of absorption and reflection of light into materials, and that allowed him to find a relationship between the layers of water in the beach and the layers of glass he would apply in his glass paintings.

The main attraction in Donostia-San Sebastián, on the other side of the border, was the Nautical Clubhouse designed by the local architects Joaquín Labayen & José Manuel

4. «Blick nach Spanien», *Frankfurter Zeitung*, July 17, August 5 and 25, September 16 and 28, and October 5, 1932. Spanish version: «Visión de España» in *Maestros de la Arquitectura Moderna en la Residencia de Estudiantes*, Madrid, Residencia de Estudiantes, 2010, pp. 351-381.

5. The encounter with Paul and Lilly Klee is documented by a photo collage: Josef Albers, *Klee, Guethary (Biarritz)* (1976.7.5), The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation. The fact that the Alberses spent some time with the Kandinskys is also documented by a postcard the Alberses sent (from Biarritz to Hendaya) to the Kandinskys. Box 1, Fonds Kandinsky. Centre Pompidou.

Aizpurúa. It was a rational building endowed by glazed surfaces that highly contrasted with the old casino in its vicinity and that opened towards the bay of La Concha. Giedion, again, included the building in an article he wrote in 1931 and said that the two architects could not have direct forerunners in Spain.⁶ In fact, due to its transatlantic shape, criticism has always inserted the building in a rationalist genealogy and has compared it to Le Corbusier's work. Nevertheless, Labayen & Aizpurúa were very much aware of the architecture that was being developed in Germany—and at the Bauhaus— at the time, and introduced Mies's MR10 chairs in the interior of the building. Aizpurúa had been at the CIRPAC conference in Basel in February 1929 and had met there several German architects,⁷ including Marcel Breuer, who was the one who called Albers a «frustrated architect.» The photographs of the interior of their office at Prim Street undoubtedly remind the «still-lives» of Barcelona's German Exhibits as well as the interiors of the Bauhaus masters's houses. Labayen & Aizpurúa's library was full of German publications, and the photographs they took of themselves—jumping one towards each other—in the roof of their office, clearly point to Lux Feininger's very famous photographs of the Bauhaus.

Again, Albers did not capture the Nautical Clubhouse in photographs, although it was only one hundred and fifty meters away from Main Street, where he shot the dome of Santa María Church. Later on, Albers composed a collage in which he contrasted the dome of this church and the perpendicular axis of the old city, with a section of the circular geometry and clean outline of the bullring.

As modern artists and architects often did at the time, the Alberses attended a bullfight during their stay in the Basque city (Fig. 2). It is well known that Le Corbusier said that he accepted the invitation to lecture in Madrid in 1928 on the condition that he be able to see the bullfights. Vasily Kandinsky, following the insistence of his wife Nina, also went to the bullfights of Donostia-San Sebastián. Kandinsky took five partial snapshots that showed the activity in the bullring, while trying to avoid the people in the front row seats.⁸ Kandinsky, who directed all the frames towards the centre of the bullring, may have used them as an exploration for his analyses of centripetal forms, which he later represented in different drawings.⁹ It is particularly relevant to compare the way Le Corbusier interpreted the bullfights, in terms of «precision, accuracy, and geometry,»¹⁰ with the way Kandinsky saw them, as a «savage slaughter» that brought him a «horrible image.»¹¹ Albers instead, seemed to be concerned by the contrast between the circular geometry of the bullring and the linear rows of people and cars.

Albers created a photo collage out of six different images (Fig. 2). One by one the photographs remind Albers's fascination for the rupture of circular geometries as well as for

6. Sigfried Giedion, «L'architecture contemporaine in Espagne», *Cahiers d'art*, 3, 1931, pp. 162-164.

7. Louis Mumford, *The CIAM discourse on Urbanism, 1928-1960*, Cambridge (Mass.), The MIT Press, 2000, p. 27.

8. Fonds Kandinsky. *Photographs, Corrida à San Sebastian*.

9. Fonds Kandinsky. *Sketchbook number 33*, p. 8 (AM 1981.65.675). Centre Pompidou. Reproduced in Vivian Endicott Barnett, *Kandinsky's Drawings. Catalogue Raisonné*, Vol 2: Sketchbooks, London, Philip Wilson Publishers, 2007, p. 277.

10. Juan José Lahuerta, «Spain: Traveling to See the Already Seen», in *Le Corbusier: An Atlas of Modern Landscapes*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 2013, pp. 140-147.

11. Nina Kandinsky, *Kandinsky y yo*, Barcelona, Parfisal Ediciones, 1990, p. 197.

the then up-to-date series of objects. Placed together however, the photographs show Albers's lifetime concern for the achievement of transparency and the spatial continuity between the interior and the exterior. The fragmentation of the circular forms in several pieces, and their replacing in a collage, as well as the view of the cars parked in the exterior, in relation to the people's rows of seats in the interior, foreground the importance Albers always gave to spatial experience over form. The works he created shortly after, such as «Aquarium» (1934) or «Cosmic» (1934), in which he overlapped circular and spiral forms, confirm such an interest.

3. THE EUROPEAN TRIP OF SUMMER 1929

The photographs of Barcelona and Donostia-San Sebastián are part of a broader itinerary Josef and Anni Albers followed, which also includes Genève and Avignon before arriving to Spain, and Paris on the way back to Dessau.

In Genève, Josef Albers made two photographs of the interior space of a hotel, which show his interest on the way spaces are articulated. In order to create unexpected spatial relationships, Albers inverted one of the two photographs. By this means, when putting the images of two continuing interior spaces together, Albers created the illusion of a virtual space in the form of zig-zag; which he continued exploring in subsequent paintings, such as «Study for Glass Construction in Red-Blue-Black» (1939-1940).

In Avignon, Albers offered two opposed points of view of the Palais des Papes. The first one represents the vertical arrangement of different volumes through a promontory, and its merging with the fabric of the medieval city. The second one emphasizes the arrival with a foreshortening of the main entrance that includes the stairway. Put together, the centrifugal and centripetal shots offer an ambiguous reading of the monument, as both a man-made and a natural construction developed over time.

In Paris, Albers made two photographs from the interior of the Eiffel Tower towards the ground, reinforcing the transparency experienced in the act of moving vertically through steel circulation cores. «Stairs» (1932), a glass painting in monochrome bands Albers created at the Bauhaus, may have been inspired by the steel stairs without risers he discovered in Paris.

Josef and Anni Albers's trip of the summer of 1929 happened only a few years before the project of modernism was abruptly interrupted both in Germany and Spain. In 1933, after the closing of the Bauhaus, the Alberses immigrated to the United States following the invitation of Philip Johnson, to join the faculty of Black Mountain College.¹²

One year before, Philip Johnson (with Henry-Russell Hitchcock) had put together the 1932 *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. From the almost eighty buildings of fifteen countries featuring at MoMA, Johnson selected two buildings constructed in Spanish ground, which coincidentally are the two works Albers saw—but did not document—on the Franco-Spanish border: Mies's Pavilion in Barcelona and Labayen & Aizpurua's Nautical Clubhouse in Donostia-San Sebastián. Additionally, Johnson chose the interior of an individual apartment that

12. *Typed letter from Philip Johnson to Josef Albers*, August 17, 1933. Josef Albers Papers (MS 32), Box 1, Folder 14, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

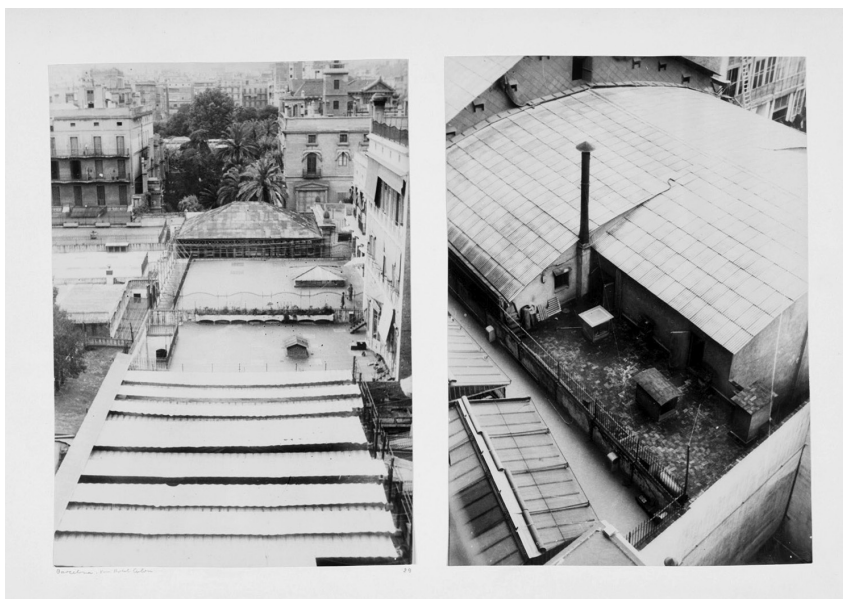
Albers himself had designed in 1931 for the German Exhibition of Architecture in Berlin. Johnson highlighted formal features and described them as: «aesthetic rather than functional considerations determined the plan» (Barcelona Pavilion); «the marine character of the design is justified by site and purpose,» (Nautical Clubhouse of Donostia-San Sebastián); or «wooden chairs designed without reference to tradition,» (Berlin's interior)¹³.

The American curators put together the exhibition in relation to three basic formal criteria: architecture as volume, regularity, and the avoidance of applied decoration. The idea was to set up a formal reading of modern architecture that could be imported from Europe to America. The exhibition, according to Johnson, established «architecture in the art world's eyes,» and we may even say that it compared architecture to objects, endowing it to a very restrained formal dimension.

Josef Albers was the first Bauhaus master to immigrate, and to extend his pedagogical legacy overseas, bringing a completely different view of modern architecture to America (Fig. 3). Albers had never been interested in objects themselves, but in the multiple facets of single objects, as well as in the interaction between these different objects. Whether he captured elements of matter (sand, water, wind, sun), materials (wicker, glass, chrome), architectural elements (columns, slabs, stairs, walls, screens, lattices, shutters, windows), interior spaces, monuments, or entire urban fabrics, Albers always showed a deep interest in tectonics and a profound fascination for discovering the multiple spatial readings of single forms.

The images Josef Albers took —and the photo collages he composed— during the summer of 1929 reveal a thorough modernist gaze, able to capture both the tectonics of form and the changing condition of matter. The drawings and paintings he created shortly after have the ability to both reveal the operative role of his photographic work and the modern legacy he brought from Europe to America. It was a legacy quite distinct from Philip Johnson's formal view of architecture —but very much aligned with the creative principle Albers had always shared with Mies—, and which would always allow him to achieve the maximum effect, with minimal means.

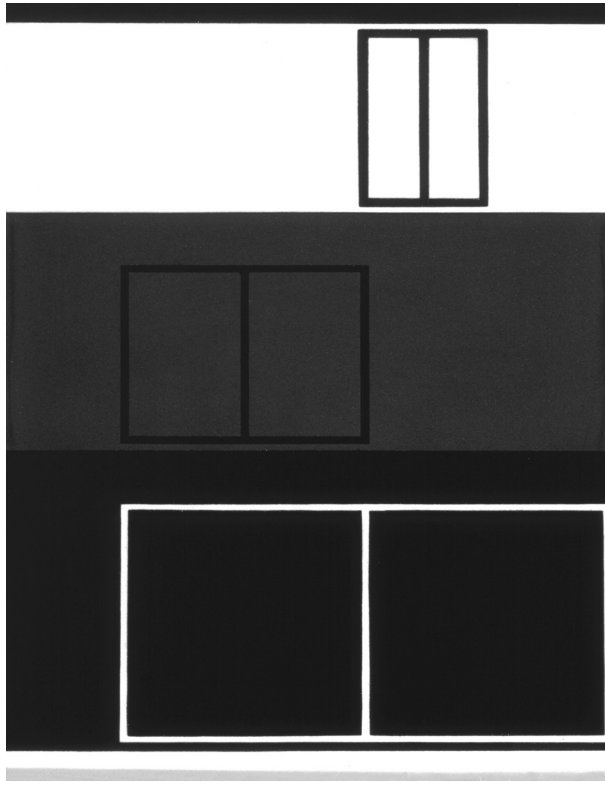
13. Mies's pavilion (pp. 187-188); Labayen & Aizpurua's Nautical Clubhouse (p. 174); Albers design of an apartment for the German Exhibition of Architecture (p. 110); Henry Russell Hitchcock Jr. and Philip Johnson, *The International Style: Architecture since 1922* (1932), New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1995.



Josef Albers, *Barcelona from the Hotel Colón '29*, 1929, Gelatin silver print, mounted on cardboard, photomontage, 29,5 x 41 cm. (Source: The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Bethany, 1976. 7.11).



Josef Albers, *Bullfights in San Sebastián*, 1929, Gelatin silver print, mounted on cardboard, photomontage, 29,5 x 41 cm. (Source: The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Bethany, 1976.7.14)



Josef Albers, *Interior A*, 1929, Sandblasted opaque flashed glass with black paint, 32,5 x 25,5cm. (Source: Josef Albers Museum, Bottrop)