

Contemporary Activity. The GATEPAC Magazine (1931-1937)

DOCUMENTOS DE ACTIVIDAD CONTEMPORÁNEA

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In May 1931, the first issue of the long-awaited Spanish modernity platform appeared: *A.C. Actividad Contemporánea*. Although the publication of the magazine had become an indispensable requirement for the existence of the GATEPAC,¹ its manufacturing process turned out to be very long and fraught with difficulties.

By Antonio Pizza

From the first steps, architect Josep Torres Clavé took a leadership role within the hierarchy of the editorial department of the magazine—a fact which became clear over the activities promoted by *A.C.* and which would be a crucial point within the internal division regarding responsibilities among the partners.²

In any case, since the first statements of the platform, as well as serving as a privileged way to disseminate their own ideas and projects, it also presented itself with clearly defined priorities which were to be applied in absolutely programmatic ways: the obvious defense of Modernity in all its urban and architectural aspects—although revised and corrected—and the assumption of the resources of an industrialized construction and the inevitable changes acquired with Modernity, adding current sarcastic criticism and a toughened denunciation of the inhuman living conditions of many neighbors from the old town.

Between the lines of the magazine, it is not difficult to highlight the field of international paradigms, the essential connection with social requests, prefiguring urban reforms essential to Barcelona, or the presentation of cinematographic and artistic themes claiming an inalienable interrelationship between the driving forces of the desirable cultural progress.

Moreover, *A.C.*, a front row exponent of *another* way to raise disciplinary issues—both in the contents and the methodologies—also represents an innovative chapter regarding the use of image, participating actively in the avant-garde experiences of the 30s in Europe.

It is indisputable and also confessed, that the German *Das Neue Frankfurt* magazine (1926–1933) had a great influence. Not only its graphical presentation but also its ethical commitment in considering architecture as an activity essential to reach a harmonious civil progress; its centrality which along its pages acquires the afferent of the “city”; and its multidisciplinary opening-up program.

It is likely however that the whole history of Modern edition has a bearing on the GATEPAC initiative. Other precedents can also be found such as the Swiss *ABC* magazine (1924–1928) in which we find the fiery rejection of

individualism; denunciation not only of academic culture but also of the romantic myths of Modernity; the pernicious denial of “aesthetic” approaches with the explicit condemnation of the autonomy of art and finally, a selfless confidence in technology and urban planning, in the background of a clear productivist push. This header will also become a graphic model of the international press because of the use of photomontages, “erased” photos with striking crosses, the rigorous implementation of texts in columns, the frequent use of fillets and typographical variations, the accomplice tension created between word and image, with the intention to prefigure a *revolutionary* praxis through the language of architecture: a search for the essential, of the object, a zero degree of expressiveness in direct contact with life’s matter which must also be rescued socially.³

In the “graphic composition” of *A.C.*’s pages, it is easy to find similarities with international experiences; the use of certain photographic shoots in which diagonal tensions dominate with strongly trimmed views; off-centered perspectives; superposition and transparencies; contrast—sometimes black or white—between images which are opposed according to binary logic to illustrate in an emphatic way what can be considered *correct* and what cannot; extreme and recurrent fragmentation of the iconic units; the mix between photo and text (or directly the use of photomontages which often offer a circular vision of what is represented); the asymmetric arrangement of the whole page; all in all strategies that become part of a shared heritage with other foreign experiments, aimed at invalidating the linear order of conventional figuration.

The photomontage will prove to be, as well, a technique in consonance with the communicative intentions of the GATEPAC, repeatedly being employed not only in the magazine but also in the presentation of projects, exhibition panels or on billboards. Although established as a common practice of the avant-gardes, perhaps one can detect in the experience of Gustavs Klucis (whose prophetic work *Dinamic City* is from 1919), the basically *political* premises that seem to adapt rather well to the strategies of the GATEPAC.

In a certain way, *A.C.* makes the technocratic project of the GATEPAC *apparent*; the confidence in a productivist scientism (which is also transmitted to the media

< Cover of *A.C.* n° 1, 1st semester 1931.

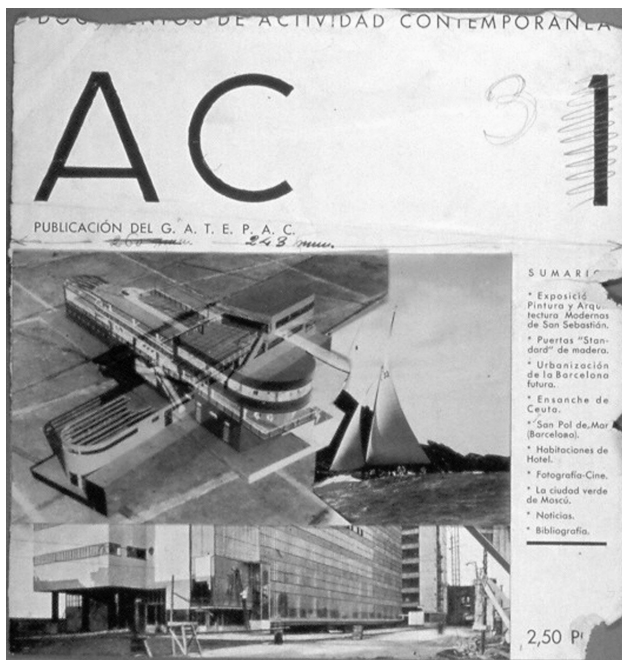


Figure 1. Cover possibilities for the first issue of A.C. magazine.

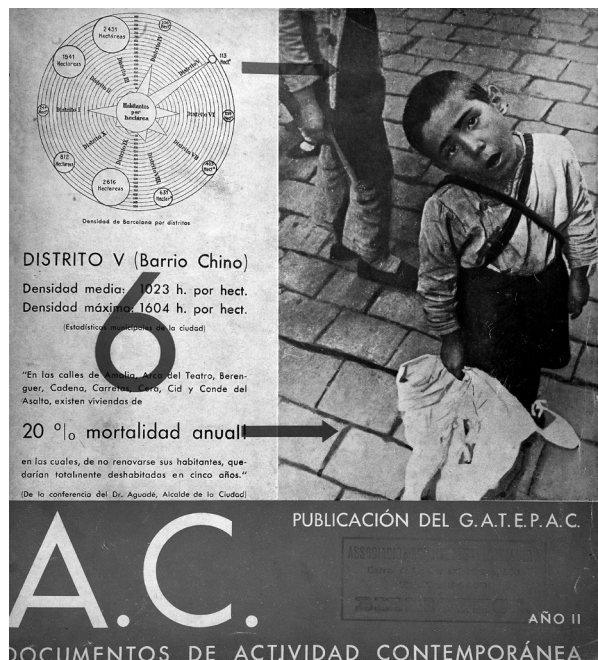


Figure 2. A.C. nº 6, 2nd semester 1932.

through which communication is canalized) results in a widespread use—in addition to an “instrumentalized” photograph for very specific purposes—of schematic tables, statistical tables, ideograms and an elementary serif typography, seeking to surround all aspects of what is said or shown with an aura of alleged *objectivity*.

The printed page is therefore conceived as an active field of graphic tensions with asymmetrical arrangements of text blocks and photos; the appearance of chromatic bands, fillets or arrows that attract and guide the reader’s attention; and with the generic introduction of composition laws in geometric matrices. It finally becomes a substantial reduction of the elements which are used, exalting their communicative articulation.

With a format that is tendentially square (23.8 x 25.8 cm),⁴ the inspiration of *Das Neue Frankfurt* designed by Hans Lestikow—a *Bauhausler*—based on Herbert Bayer’s format for the 1923 exhibition catalog of *Staatliches Bauhaus*, predominates in A.C. This influence is apparent in the covers of the first issues⁵: a restrained grill in which there are two main bands, using adjusted white areas. The upper band contains information about the contents while the lower one uses an iconic system appreciably manipulated. The typography used in the Spanish magazine is the one forged by Paul Renner in 1928 (*Futura*), and the frequent use of crosses which vividly “erased” what was considered dissatisfied with GATEPAC’s program, besides having previously appeared in the pages of *ABC*, had been consecrated by Willi Baumeister in the manifesto drawn for the exhibition of the German 1927

Werkbund Die Wohnung, in which a flaming red cross was superimposed upon a photo of a convoluted and overloaded bourgeois interior style.

The prerogatives of A.C. will be showcased in a peremptory way. In the editorial of issue 1—in a publication in which, by definition, articles and projects are not signed individually⁶—the need for architecture to have a double *temporal* and *geographical* value is affirmed, having to reflect not only the new arrangements of society but also what can be determined by the climate of the region in which it is located. In this case, the reference is southern architecture, characterized by “terraces, canopies, cantilevers, filtered light” which have to interact with the tenets of functionalism.⁷

This is the issue where the symptomatic parallelism between the 1927 serialized houses by Oud in the Stuttgart *Weissenhof* and the houses “without architect” of Sant Pol de Mar, appear. The binary method—which architects will refer to many times, generally following a black and white opposition—is, this time, softened, becoming a suggestive parallelism between equals: the standard, the principle of maximum economy of technological and expressive means is no Modern invention, since their roots are in the clearly anthropological nature of a distant past. In this same issue an unavoidable parameter is quoted: the experience of socialist USSR architecture and, specifically, the competition of the ‘Green City of Moscow’,⁸ a touchstone of GATEPAC’s reflection on the new city, as can be seen in the project *Ciutat del Repòs i de Vacances* (City of Rest and Holidays).



Figure 3. A.C. n.º 25, June 1937, page 20.

If *acclimatization* in international architecture is proposed as one of the group's objectives, another goal will be to establish a proper dialogue with the past. The prospects for mediation, the resignation to counterproductive radicalisms and the desire for a status quo practice, are also strengthened by an active osmosis with historical remains, far from any archaeological mimicry temptation.

One of the priority issues that this modernization project distinguished was school education and, therefore, the defense of an appropriate architecture for teaching. In August 1931 it appears in the agenda of the group and, apparently, it is the suggested topic for a first mono-



Figure 4. A.C. n.º 1, 1931, page 25.

graph that had to be published immediately in the magazine with the active participation of Josep Lluís Sert and Jose Manuel Aizpurua. Its appearance however will be postponed to issues 9 and 10 in 1933, highlighting the importance of the theme regarding a reorganization of an egalitarian society which also had to be performed in tectonic terms. In these two publications, together with testimonial local initiatives, much foreign material will also converge, with a predominant reference to the work of Werner Moser, although GATCPAC's members were interested in a larger sample of events.

Holding the CIRPAC meeting in Barcelona in late

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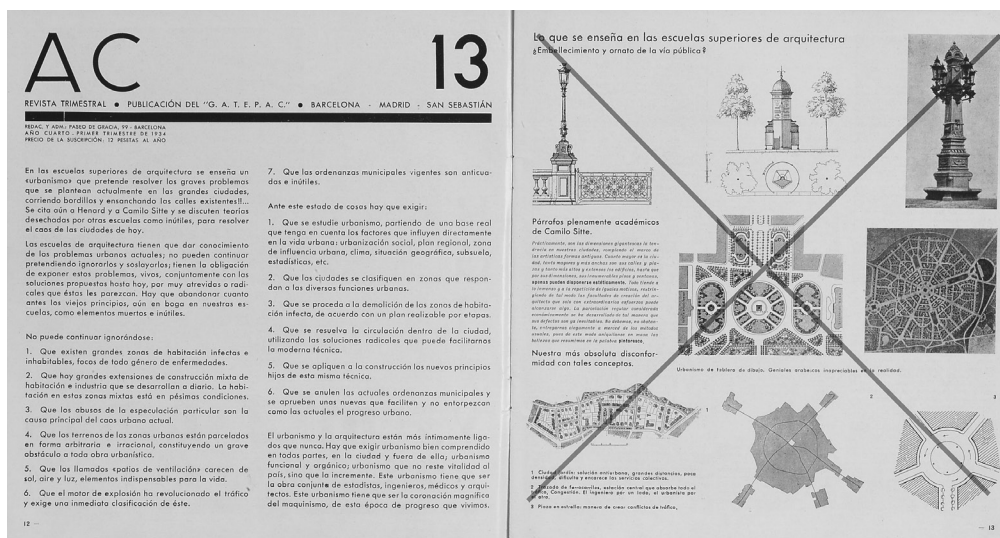


Figure 5. A.C. n.º 13, 1st semester 1934, pages 12 and 13.

March 1932 makes the GATEPAC acquire a leading role in the international propaganda press. The group is responsible, among other things, of developing in an original way some aspects of the debate on the functional city, as reflected in issue 7 (3rd semester 1932), dedicated to new needs arising from the rights that the urban working masses had of leisure time.

With issue 6 (2nd semester 1932) two themes which would later develop extensively, appear for the first time: on the one hand the recovery of popular Mediterranean architecture—with special interest in construction and residential forms in Ibiza (“Ibiza, the island that does not need architectural renewal”)—and, on the other, the fierce denunciation of the miserable conditions in which neighbors lived in the degraded historical center of the city (“Barcelona’s *barrio chino* – District V”), with the testimony of the horrifying photos taken by Margaret Michaelis.⁹

Between late 1933 and 1934, GATCPAC’s statements seem to gradually opt towards new conceptualizations. Josep Lluís Sert, in a conference organized by the Alumni Association of the Barcelona School of Architecture and was transcribed in A.C., marked distances regarding the radicalisms of Nordic inspired Modern architecture, using categorical statements.¹⁰ Two monographic issues devoted to popular architecture (nº 18, 2nd semester 1935) and rural architecture of Ibiza (nº 21, 1st semester 1936), are explicitly inspired by this precise ideological statement, aimed at promoting the “Modern” valorization of traditional Mediterranean tectonic forms, with specific attention to contemporary Italian production.¹¹ In issue 21, both the anthropological studies and detailed photo reports made on site by the “ex-Dadaist” Raoul Hausmann and the works by Edgar Heilbronner, will also converge.

Since the second half of 1936, the major political events affecting Spain—particularly conflictive in Catalonia—and the SAC (Union of Architects of Catalonia) professional training, are dutifully recorded by A.C. Torres Clavé’s militancy gives the magazine much more engaged roles from a political and social point of view. In an undated propaganda brochure—attributed to this period according to its content and because it is written in Catalan—one can read the following slogans: “A.C. is a fight magazine [...] A.C. is of a highly favorable extremism (...) A.C. is a magazine of clear, distinct critique”.¹² The contents of the new period of the magazine are even more clear in the editorial of the double issue 23–24:

*The firm and resolute struggle we have had since the formation of our group against everything established in architecture, against academic, fossil, rotten architecture to which the false professional concept of many architects had led to, will, from now on, become a close collaboration with the Union of Architects of Catalonia, whose guidance we share enthusiastically.*¹³

The radical metamorphosis taking place are accurately reflected in the last issue (nº 25, June 1937), which is published in three languages, Catalan, Spanish and French. Entitled ‘*Problemes de la Revolució*’ (Problems of the Revolution), the front cover shows a picture of anarchist Durruti’s funeral (1936) taken by Margaret Michaelis.

*A new era begins. What was once considered utopia, achieves reality now. Hopefully, in this society which is being formed, logical solutions we’ve come up with through our work will be addressed.*¹⁴

Illustrated with whole page images, using capital letters at different scales, composed almost as a succession of slogans and designed with a powerful and easy to read graphics, this issue emphasizes the theory that the environment determines the ways of being of the individual, its rapid and radical transformation will allow the improvement not only of people’s lives but also their existential behaviors.

It is therefore easy to understand that much of the publication is devoted to the dramatic theme of Barcelona’s “District V”. In developing the theme, after a clear explanation of the historical processes that have led to this situation of inhuman degradation, we find the illustration of the Decalogue of the measures to be taken and their various implementation stages, resulting in a radical “urban surgery”.

History condemned issue 25 to be the end point of a passionate and confident experience that was brutally cut short by a historical and personal tragedy and not the starting point of an architectural and urban revolution. Indeed, among the papers of who, at this point, was the undisputed chief editor of this forward-looking platform, Torres Clavé, we find evidence of layouts and materials for issues whose appearance was planned for the near future. Issue 26 was to insist on the serious problem of housing, fighting against the “pedantic” house of bourgeois culture and offering a series of strict operational guidelines. Issue 27 had to focus on the themes of the “functional city” targeted by CIAM 4. Of issue 28 we only have a sheet of paper with the note “Clothing and personal items, simple and practical, easy to clean, easy to carry, adapting to new life” and of issue 29, a proposed headline saying ‘Outdoor life. Entertainment’.

From this moment, culminating in the dramatic death of Torres Clavé in the war on January 12, 1939, historical events would reserve to Modern architecture and its propaganda very different routes from those that had been carefully and boldly drawn in 25 issues of this exemplary magazine of Spanish forward-looking intelligentsia.

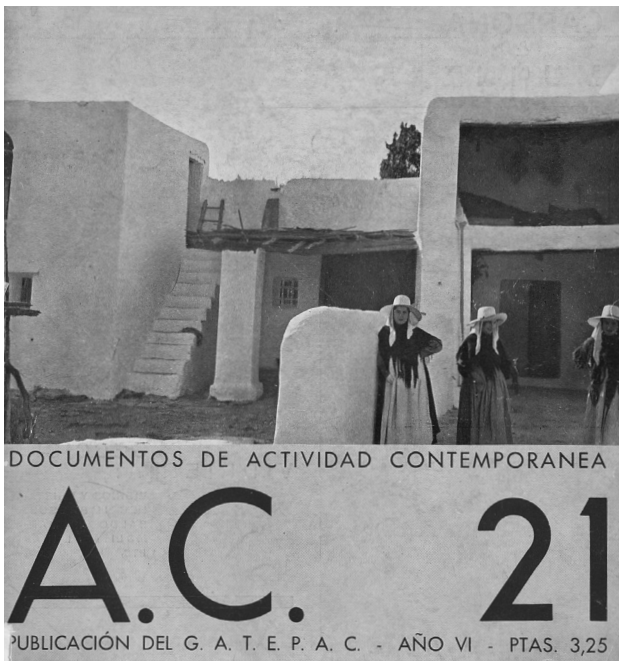


Figure 6. A.C. nº 21, 1st semester 1936.

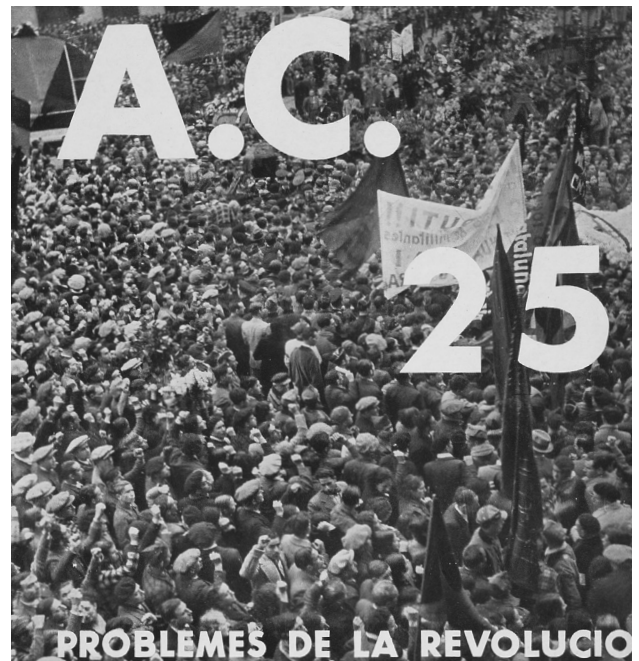


Figure 7. A.C. nº 25, June 1937.

Notes

1. The "Grupo de Arquitectos y Técnicos Españoles para el Progreso de la Arquitectura Contemporánea" (Group of Spanish Architects and Technicians for the Progress of Contemporary Architecture, GATEPAC in its Spanish acronym) was created in October 1930, structured in the Centre, North and East groups, becoming the latter the "Grup d'Arquitectes i Tècnics Catalans per al Progrés de l'Arquitectura Contemporània" (Group of Catalan Architects and Technicians for the Progress of Contemporary Architecture, GATCPAC in its Catalan acronym).
2. In a non-dated typed text which has been conserved at the *Arxiv Històric del Col·legi d'Arquitectes de Catalunya* (Historic Archive of the Catalan Architecture Centre, AH-COAC in its Catalan acronym) we can read: "General Editor. Torres. He will be responsible for the summary formation [...]. Once the materials are collected he will present the summary to the board and the other groups for approval. Afterwards he will arrange the composition of the issue and once he has done the format he will submit it once again for approval of the directors".
3. On the other hand, the experience of ABC (in the editorial staff of which we can find, among others, El Lissitzky, M. Stam, H. Meyer or H. Schmidt) exerted a notable influence in two Dutch magazines, *i 10* (1927-1929) and *De 8 en Opbouw* (1932-1943), which maintained contacts and propitious exchanges with A.C. -notoriously the second one.
4. The *Wendingen* magazine (1918-1931), directed and designed by H. T. Wijdeveld, was the first to adopt the square format (34,25cm).
5. Another precedent which we must not forget is the Soviet CA (Contemporary Architecture) magazine, with a cover designed by A. Gan and which was edited in Russian and German between 1926 and 1930.
6. In the October 26, 1933 meeting minutes (GATCPAC, AH-COAC archive): we read: "Works of the associate directors of the A.C. magazine. It is conveyed that all the works of the associate directors, both personal and collective, published in the magazine, will appear under the motto 'gatcpac' and never under the name of their author or authors. In the case of collaboration between an associate director and an architect who is not an associate, the motto will be 'gatcpac

in collaboration with...' [...]. GATCPAC signature: it is conveyed that the works of the associate directors of the GATCPAC, provided that the board approves it, will be signed GATCPAC." Since its second issue (1924), the ABC magazine had given up on individual identification of the authors of the articles, inspired by a thesis proclaimed by Van Doesburg in 1923, extolling the value of collective action.

7. A.C. nº 1, 1931, 13.
8. 'La Ciudad Verde de Moscú', A.C. nº 1, 1931, 32. ('The Green City of Moscow').
9. AA.VV., *Margaret Michaelis. Fotografía, vanguardia y política en la Barcelona de la República*, IVAM, Valencia, 1998.
10. "Conferencia de J. L. Sert, arquitecto del GATCPAC", A.C. nº 16, 4th semester 1934, 43-44. ("Conference by Josep Lluís Sert, architect of the GATCPAC").
11. "Lógicamente, instintivamente, los pueblos latinos son los puntales de esta diferenciación anti-nórdica del racionalismo. Diferenciación que tiende, sobre todo, a someter el funcionalismo de la materia, al funcionalismo del espíritu." (cursivas en el original) "La exposición de 'La Triennale', Milán", A.C. nº 13, 1st semester 1934, 38. (Logically, instinctively, Latin peoples are the mainstay of this anti-Nordic differentiation of rationalism. A differentiation which tends, over all, to submit material functionalism to spiritual functionalism (in italics in the original version).
12. "Revista A.C.", non-dated leaflet, A.C.-GATCPAC, AH-COAC Archive.
13. "El GATCPAC ante la transformación actual", A.C. nº 23-24 3rd-4th semesters, 1936, 8. ("The GATCPAC in front of today's transformation")
14. "Es el momento", A.C. nº 25, June 1937, 3. ("It's the moment").

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