

The Vision of Utopia

62



Designed in late 1932 by Josep Lluís Sert and Josep Torres Clavé, *Casa Bloc* is one of the paradigmatic works of these architects who represented the most active core of the Modern Movement in Catalonia, known as GATCPAC (Group of Catalan Architects and Technicians for the Progress of Contemporary Architecture), founded in 1930 echoing the Spanish GATEPAC. I use the word “paradigm” in the sense of a theoretical framework or set of theories. In fact, *Casa Bloc* was not only the first major social housing building in Barcelona conceived in functional terms but it also exemplifies the reception in this city of the notions of the Modern Movement and how the guidelines recently approved in the 4th CIRPAC Congress were applied.

By Rossend Casanova

The ideas that emerged in Central Europe, adapted by Catalan architects, included concepts such as practicality, economy of space and material, socialisation and socially committed approaches. Those young architects under thirty were able to transmit this vision to the politicians, both the Catalan government (*Generalitat de Catalunya*) and Barcelona City Council, by calling for decisive involvement of the public authorities in that architectural innovation. A meaningful purpose, given that the Republican government established in 1931 sought to change the nature of the country and found in architecture one of the tools to achieve this goal.

In an interesting interview conducted by the journalist Irene Polo with Sert in 1933, the latter stated that *Casa Bloc* was “a first attempt at the future dwelling unit, which clearly and efficiently provides the solution to the housing problem, one of the most important and crucial issues of civilisation” (*Quaderns Crema*, Barcelona, 2003).

The first stone of *Casa Bloc* was laid on 12, March 1933. Its peculiar “S” shape –inspired by Le Corbusier’s redent–took, from a bird’s-eye view, the form of a fret structured into a total of five blocks, where the connecting elements included staircases and lifts, the latter inconceivable until then in social housing.

The architecture (pilotis, more openings, open galleries–corridors, etc.) served a social purpose (communal areas, collective spaces, squares, etc.). *Casa Bloc* was an experiment, a building designed to be reproduced in a city which was being developed according to the doctrine of social justice. However, the good intentions were truncated with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), which limited the resources, first economic, later material and finally human. The work had slowed down by 1937 and came to a halt in the following year.

The defeat of Republican Spain by Franco’s troops also had negative effects on *Casa Bloc*. After a period of abandonment, the new regime decided to complete it and assign the apartments to soldiers and their families. It was painted in ochre colours, which the residents were allowed to change as they pleased. Moreover, in 1948 the so-called *Bloc fantasma* (Ghost block) was added with the aim of accommodating families of police officers and one of the squares was closed off and privatized.

With Sert having emigrated to the United States and Torres Clavé who had died defending the Republican front, *Casa Bloc* gradually deteriorated and took on the appearance of a decadent peripheral mass. The improvements would come with democracy. A first block was renovated in 1986, and the remaining four from 1997. In 2008 the *Bloc fantasma* was demolished and the two squares were recovered for the local residents. The latter was the work of architects Víctor and Marc Seguí commissioned by INCASÒL (Catalan Land Institute), and involved adapting the building to the current standards of habitability and satisfying the needs of residents (new gas, water and electricity installations, television cabling, etc).

Today, eighty years after the first stone was laid, we have opened an apartment–museum, Dwelling 1/11, in order to restore its original appearance and, using the information obtained, complete what was left unfinished in 1939 with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War.

It has been a laborious project, undertaken over two years and developed in different stages, both at an institutional level with agreements with the owners, INCASÒL, and the *Institut de Cultura de Barcelona* (Barcelona Arts Institute) through DHUB and at a documentary and operational level with its restoration and use.

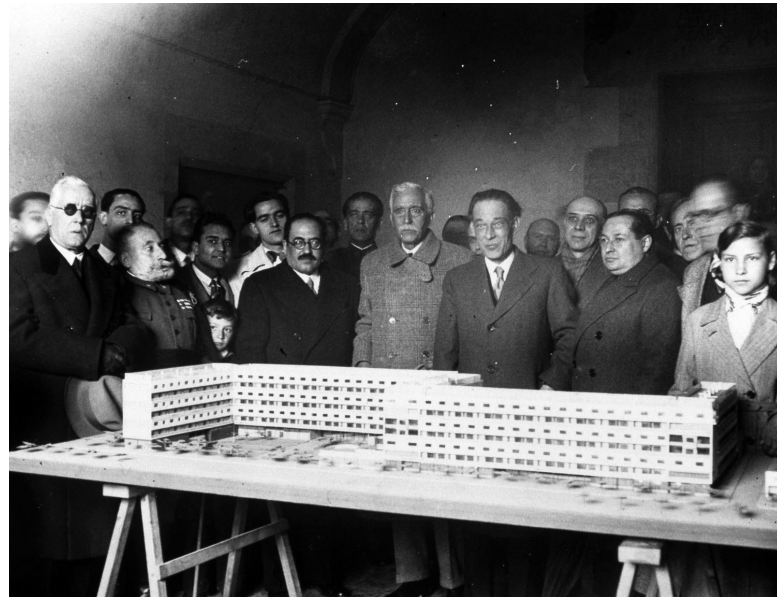
Barcelona has Gained a Museum Facility

Opening Dwelling 1/11 to visitors has helped complete the city’s museum facilities. There are now several venues that can be visited, allowing us to understand how the city has been built and furnished. However, this is an

< The original restored kitchen in which a 30s range, manufactured in Barcelona by José Mingrat, has been placed. © DHUB. Photo by Lourdes Jansana, 2012.

exceptional case within the whole, as it is one of the few examples of the Modern Movement in Barcelona that can be seen and, moreover, is not a recreation or replica, like the German Pavilion that Mies van der Rohe built for the Barcelona International Exhibition (taken down in 1930 at the end of the event and rebuilt between 1983 and 1986) or the Pavilion of the Republic, built for the 1937 Paris International Exhibition (and rebuilt between 1991 and 1992 in the north of Barcelona). The *Casa Bloc* apartment-museum is a restored space, original in the strict sense of the term.

This initiative emerged from the very dynamic of DHUB, which studies and analyses the design of interiors and promotes knowledge about them. The apartment-museum

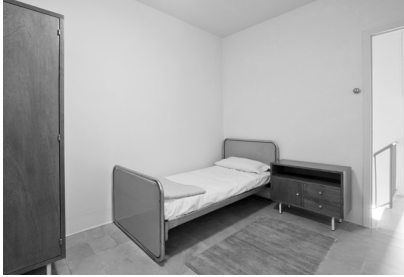


1





3



4



5



2



6

Figure 1. The President of the Government of Catalonia, **Francesc Macià**, and the Mayor of Barcelona, **Jaume Aiguader**, in front of the scale model of the Casa Bloc on March 12, 1933, the day they laid the first stone of the building.
© Arxiu Fotogràfic de Barcelona. Photo by Pérez de Rozas.

Figure 2. View of block 2 of Casa Bloc with the apartment-museum restored on the corner.
© DHUB. Photo by Lourdes Jansana, 2012.

Figure 3. The dining room with the balcony incorporated, before the restoration.
© DHUB. Photo by Raimon Solà, 2010.

Figure 4. The single bedroom after the restoration with the purpose-made wardrobe and side table together with a 1930s German bed.
© DHUB. Photo by Lourdes Jansana, 2012.

Figure 5. The dining room and the balcony after the restoration. It is furnished with a purpose-made sideboard, the table model 91 by **Marcel Breuer** and **Thonet** B751 chairs.
© DHUB. Photo by Lourdes Jansana, 2012.

Figure 6. The double bedroom after the restoration with the wardrobe, the bed and side table purposely-made following the instructions published in the A.C. Journal.
© DHUB. Photo by Lourdes Jansana, 2012.

also seeks to be a reflection on the forms and functions of the objects and spaces. It should be noted that the collections of the Barcelona Decorative Arts Museum (affiliated with DHUB) include pieces from GATCPAC and the period. Therefore, Dwelling 1/11 is an opportunity to better understand what the Modern Movement represented in Catalonia and some of its approaches.

A Painstaking Restoration

Located in block 2, floor 1, door 11, Dwelling 1/11 is at a formal level the same as the others in the building. It is a two-bedroom duplex apartment, measuring 60m² and with a very simple layout. The lower floor consists of the entrance, a corridor leading to a space shared by the washtub and shower, the kitchen, the toilet and the dining room with balcony, and on the upper floor there are two bedrooms.

The duplex apartment had undergone some changes that were also common in other dwellings, such as the closing of the balcony to extend the dining room, the enlargement of the bathroom, the remodelling of the kitchen and the change of coverings. Therefore, the restoration began with the removal of anything that was not original, added over a period of 20 years: floorings (tiles and parquet), plasterwork, wallpaper, tiling, false walls, unoriginal woodwork, sanitary ware and modern fittings. Everything was replaced with pieces taken from the same building or with new materials but just like the old ones. For example, the five new doors were substituted with another five taken from other apartments, in agreement with their residents, so that they were from the *Casa Bloc* itself. In return, each resident who gave up a door were given a new one. The original ironwork was also restored, including doorknobs, hinges and blind winding. The most complicated case was on the ground floor, as it was necessary to remove 30m² of hydraulic flooring from another apartment, clean and lay the floor tiles in Dwelling 1/11, and replace the flooring in the other apartment. This was done with all the fixtures and fittings, in the kitchen, the toilet and the laundry area with shower. It should be noted that we were able to save the last shower pan left in the building, which is a very interesting industrial piece. Made of white fired enamelled steel, 80x70cm, it has some small legs that raise it up to 22cm. The legs were screwed into the pan when it was fitted, which shows that it was mass produced and when dismantled it could be transported more easily. Moreover, it is not built in, so that its economy in its manufacture, transport and fitting and aesthetics followed the design parameters of the Modern Movement.

The reconstructed elements based on data obtained in situ play an important role in this restoration. The work was commissioned, in terms of the chromatic and mate-

rial analysis, to the Department of Crystallography and Mineralogy at Barcelona University. The stratigraphic and documentary studies resolved the theme of colour, a very important aspect. The tests on plaster, wood and metal resulted in a harmonious and coherent colouring, similar to other GATCPAC works, with a light blue hue on the walls and ceilings, dark blue for the stair banister, and orange for the exterior grilles.

Selecting the Furniture

To understand the functional elements of Dwelling 1/11 and how the spaces could be occupied, we placed pieces of furniture that closely follow the GATCPAC philosophy. We consulted the journal *A. C. Documentos de Actividad Contemporánea*, through which the group promoted its ideas, commitments and affinities. The twenty-five issues between 1931 and 1937 were published in Barcelona and the editor and chief writer was Josep Torres Clavé, one of the designers of *Casa Bloc*. The publication covered architecture but also interior design (among other subjects) and through its pages the group set out its objectives and programme, graphically explained with drawings, photographs and models, while showing the work of other architects close to its ideas, such as Marcel Breuer, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius and Otto Haesler.

The journal *A.C.* presented two kinds of furniture. On the one hand, by architects or specialized companies and of interest to the GATCPAC members because it was in keeping with their philosophy: pieces of furniture that were aesthetically honest and practical and that avoided any past dogma or style. On the other, furniture they called "*Mobiliario Standard tipos GATEPAC*" and suggested by the group. They are pieces considered appropriate for the needs of modern life. Tables, sideboards, chairs, shelving, beds, bedside tables or wardrobes were described, drawn and reproduced in several issues.

This furniture perfectly embodies the ideals of GATCPAC and the architects used it in their buildings. This can be seen in a house in Muntaner Street (Sert, 1930) or the studio of the architect Germán Rodríguez Arias (1931) and, above all, in simpler spaces, such as the *Colapsible beach house* (1931) or in a house for rent in Roselló Street (Sert, 1930).

Finally, we also took into consideration the furniture that GATEPAC sold in its *M.I.D.V.A. (Mobles i Decoració per a la Vivenda Actual)* shop in *Passeig de Gràcia* number 99, where they displayed their own ideas and those of others, such as the Finnish architect Alvar Aalto, the French company *Stylclair* (which sold models by the Hungarian architect and industrial designer Marcel Breuer) and the Viennese firm *Thonet*.

For Dwelling 1/11 we have reproduced some pieces of furniture featured in A.C. Their size, material, colour and other relevant information was published, meaning that it was possible to construct them. In total, a sideboard, two wardrobes, two bedside tables and a bed were made. Several specialists in wood, iron and paint participated in the process, always endeavouring to follow the techniques used in the 30s and using the technology present in Spain. For instance, the wooden furniture was made with tools from the period, such as the band saw and the combination machine.

In terms of the furniture by other architects or companies which GATCPAC admired, for the dining room we decided to buy a table model 91 by the Hungarian architect and industrial designer Marcel Breuer. The table was produced in 1933 by the company Embru and distributed by the firm Wohnbedarf, both based in Zurich. Its design follows the new simplicity in furniture formulated from the 20s. It is a very light and functional table. Its board is covered with black linoleum on a structure formed by tongued-and-grooved veneered chipboard on a pine frame. The frame has maple veneered chipboard along its edge. The four straight legs of chromed steel tube are screwed into the lower part of the board with metal angle bars. Linoleum enables easy cleaning and the designers of the Modern Movement advocated it as a hygienic material which also avoided the need for a tablecloth.

Another example are the folding chairs in the dining room, model B751 (1930) by Thonet. This light and highly functional chair is a piece that the GATCPAC members used frequently, both for dining room tables and desks and, even, for stands and in the M.I.D.V.A. shop itself. In the double bedroom we have also placed a period chair from the Grifé & Escoda shop in Barcelona, its main office in Spain.

We also considered it appropriate to include pieces that had belonged to a GATCPAC member. Of course, the ideal would have been a piece of furniture of Sert, Torres Clavé or Subirana, the designers of the building, but as we were unable to find any that could work in this space (let us remember, aimed at social housing), we decided to place a folding chair B61 (1930), also produced by Thonet and which came from the Barcelona apartment of Germán Rodríguez Arias, partner founder of GATCPAC and an important architect with major rationalist buildings in the city.

Among the different pieces that have helped to complete the spaces, we can mention the ceiling lamps, which were chosen following the elements advocated by the group and which they often used in other buildings and spaces. Thus, we have placed a round glass lamp with simple geometrical forms in the dining room. The bed

linen is also from the 30s, while the hand-woven wool carpets are new but made using old techniques, coloured with natural dyes, following the models published in the journal A.C.

It is worth noting that several architects specializing in the Modern Movement were advisors on the restoration, including Josep Maria Rovira and Juan José Lahuerta (08.09.11), Albert Bastardes (12.09.11), Josep Maria Montaner (29.09.11), Oriol Bohigas (5.10.11) and Antonio Pizza (21.10.11).

In short, the restoration and opening to the public of the apartment-museum aims to provide a space that invites reflection and enables a better understanding of the 30s in the field of architecture and design in Catalonia.

References

- A.C. *Publicación del GATEPAC*, Barcelona, *Fundación Caja de Arquitectos, Arquithemas*, 15, 2005.
- A.C. *La revista del G.A.T.E.P.A.C. 1931-1937*, Madrid, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2008 (exhibition catalogue).
- Andreu Carrascal, "Els dissenys de l'arquitecte Llongueras per a la Casa Bloc", Barcelona, *INDE, COAC*, January-March 2010, 24-25.
- Rosend Casanova, "L'Habitatge 1/11 de la Casa Bloc. Un exemple de gestió cultural en un pis recuperat i museïtzat", Barcelona, *Butlletí XXV, Reial Acadèmia Catalana de Belles Arts de Sant Jordi*, 2012, 187-201.
- Casanova, Rosend. *Casa Bloc. Dwelling 1/11*. Barcelona, DHUB, 2012.
- Mehlau-Wiebkling, Friederike; Rüegg, Arthur; Tropeano, Ruggero, *Schweizer Typenmöbel 1925-1935. Sigfried Giedion und die Wohnbedarf AG*, Zurich, GTA, 1989.
- Rovira, Josep Maria; García, Carolina B., *Casa Bloc: Barcelona, 1932-1939-2009*, Barcelona, Mudito & Co., 2011.
- Rovira, Josep Maria; Pizza, Antonio (ed.), *G.A.T.C.P.A.C. Una nova arquitectura per a una nova ciutat*, Barcelona, COAC-MHCB, 2006.
- Vege sack, Alexander von; Remmele, Mathias, *Marcel Breuer. Design and Architecture*, Weil am Rhein, Vitra Design Museum, 2003.
- Wilk, Christopher, *Marcel Breuer. Furniture and Interiors*, New York MoMA, , 1981 (exhibition catalogue).

Rosend Casanova

Born in Barcelona in 1970, he is the DHUB (Disseny Hub Barcelona) conservator and he is in charge of the Collection of Product Design within the Department of Collections at the Barcelona Decorative Arts Museum. PhD in Art History from Barcelona University, he has specialized in late 19th and early 20th century Art History. Curator of the restoration of the Casa Bloc apartment-museum.