

ESSAYS

Modern Heritage, organic space, material permanence: Torres Posse House in Tafí del Valle

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The Torres Posse House (1957-1958) is a testimony to the particular forms that the modern house took in the context of northern Argentina, and at the same time shows how the conservation and sustainability of modern heritage come in large part from the quality of its original project. Built to enjoy the holidays, it was rationally organized, according to the demands of economy, topography of the site, climate, and orientation. The gallery, the most memorable space, is a typological approach that remains in good condition. The project established a stone box within which to arrange a demanding interior program with total freedom. The durability of the material proposed it as a modern architecture, capable of transcending the obsolescence of the modern image to resist the passage of time and aging without conflict.

A house, a place, an opportunity

A beautiful photograph shows a particular space. A boy dressed in the local style, with a country hat, appears leaning on a side wall. The setting is not casual. The center of the shot is occupied by a space partially enclosed on three of its sides and open to the front. The stone walls and the cement tile floor contrast with a white lateral wall and the ceiling. Two big openings propose a particular relationship with the exterior. On the side one, a large opening generates the relationship with the land; in the background, a large window with glass frames the view to the Tucuman mountains. The deckchairs and furniture – more typical of a garden – seem to indicate a place for relaxed and festive use, a place for family and friends to meet, a room to be in the shade protected from the wind during the long days of the summer vacation.

Like a covered patio or an open living room, it is an intermediate space between inside and outside, positioned on the highest part of the site; from there it is possible to dominate the immediate environment and contemplate the distant one. It is a reinterpretation of the traditional gallery, based on the consideration of the climate.

The picture was taken in the early 1960s, in the house designed in late 1957 by Eduardo Sacriste (1905-1999) for the Torres Posse family in Tafí del Valle, Tucuman, and built during 1958. From that great gallery, the outdoor life enjoyed by the children was organized. It was the place to receive friends, contemplate the landscape, and, definitely, the condenser of the family life during vacation.

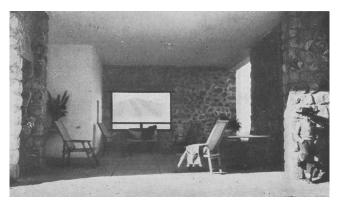
Sacriste graduated as an architect in Buenos Aires in 1932.¹ From the beginning of his professional work, he assumed "the spirit of what we called modern architecture at that time," developing some works in the keys of early rationalism.³

At the end of the 1930s, the debate in Argentina proposed

broad paths to overcome functionalism and the search for more culturally rooted approaches. The debate initiated by the Austral Group⁴ recognized the critical moment of the modern architecture and the distance from its initial spirit.⁵ In the early 1940s, Sacriste traveled to the United States of America (USA) to study prefabrication;⁶ he came to know Frank Lloyd Wright's (1867-1959) work which was recorded in his book *Usonia*.⁷

He arrived in Tucuman in 1944 to teach at the School of Architecture and two years later, he was one of the protagonists of the creation of the mythical and renowned Institute of Architecture and Urbanism of Tucuman, together with Horacio Caminos (1914-1990) and Jorge Vivanco (1912-1987).8 As it is known, Jorge Vivanco contacted some architects at the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM) in Bridgewater in 1947, so that they could be integrated into the new pedagogical experience. Between 1948 and 1949 Enrico Tedeschi (1910-1978), Cino Calcaprina (1919-1977), Guido Oberti (1907-2003), Ernesto Nathan Rogers (1909-1969), and Luigi Piccinato (1899-1983) arrived. The participation of some of the Italians in 1945 in the Associazione per l'Architettura Organica (APAO) [Association for Organic Architecture] nourished the spirit of renewal that had taken root in the Institute.9

Around 1951, political issues affected the functioning of the Institute, which was suspended and its teachers were displaced. This took him away from Tucuman, and he dedicated himself to teaching abroad. During that time, he drew and made an analysis of works that would become part of *Building footprints*. Upon his return in 1957, he was appointed Dean of the Faculty; it was then that Guillermo Torres Posse, who lived with Josefina Leal Lobo and their large family in an urban house designed by Jorge Vivanco, commissioned him to design the summer house in Tafí.



O1 Eduardo Sacriste, Torres Posse House, Tafí del Valle, Argentina, 1957-1958, photo c.1960, view of the gallery, the living space of the house.
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Sacriste was direct in characterizing the commission: "The program of this house asked for economy and 12 beds." The Torres Posse had eight children and many relatives and friends. They used the property as a second home to enjoy during vacation.

The dwelling was located in that wide valley, between two mountain ranges, at an altitude of about 2,000 meters (m), with a temperate and humid climate in the summer, but dry, cold, and with some snow in the winter. The opening of the road in 1943 meant the greatest interest was to enjoy the valley during the summers. It was one of the favorite places for University professors.¹³

The architect wrote:

Tafí del Valle is a magnificent site. It is a sheltered valley, which descends steeply from north to south, where you can reach it from Tucuman. In summer it rains and turns all green. In winter it dries up, it is cold, but with a radiant sun. It is full of stones (granite). Fruit trees are given generously. It is covered by the remains of pre-Columbian indigenous populations that form circular platforms of 12 m in diameter, surrounded by large stones. 14

From the stone box to the living space

The house was located on a large and generous piece of land. The topography marked a wavy slope. It was located in between the lowest and the highest part, where there was also an accentuated unevenness. Sacriste

always said that the house should be part of the environment rather than something superimposed with the purpose of modifying it; on the contrary, it was necessary to understand its qualities when designing the project. 15

He expressed this clearly when he defined it as the link with the place, since in it "fundamental aspects of the link between man and environment are reflected: landscape, customs, building techniques." ¹⁶

Showing the volumetric hierarchy of its conception, the house breaks up at an angle, accompanying the unevenness of the terrain.¹⁷ Facing the street, the continuity of the stone wall presents it in an imposing way; from the other side, the break of the volume is more clearly perceived. The

facade integrates the different levels, while the roof slab strengthens the horizontal line.

The entrance to the property is at the lowest level, which facilitates access; the covered space for the car, which acts as a portico, was arranged accordingly, allowing entry to the living room of the house. The facade to the street presents what was thought to be the main entrance; a staircase resolves the difference in level as a light folded slab.

The break in the volume clearly marks the layout of the program. In the longer, two-story sector, the minimum children's bedrooms are located on the upper floor, and the living room and parents' bedroom on the lower floor. The change of direction of the volume coincides with the change of level, and the dining room, kitchen, and gallery are organized here.

The house puts into action a very particular idea. Sacriste emphasized the lesson received from an Italian worker who had taught him:

What you have to do to design is to build a very precise perimeter wall, with its doors and windows, and then inside of it, do the ant thing: you move with total freedom, according to your needs.¹⁸

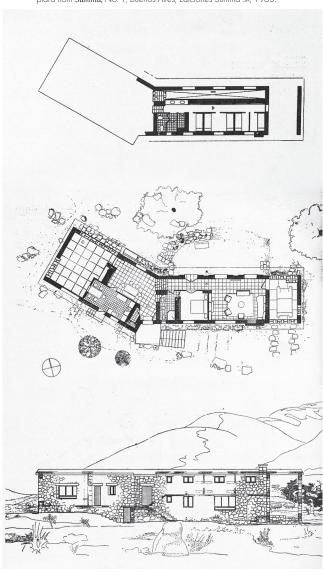
He highlighted the coincidence of this idea with the scheme of the Torres Posse House and the plan of the Villa Stein-de-Monzie (1926-1927), Garches, by Le Corbusier (1887-1965).¹⁹ It was a particular interpretation of the concept of the free plan. In the Corbusian idea, the pilotis ensured the independence of the programmatic distribution and configuration of the envelope regarding the supporting structure and permitted the use of the horizontal window. In the Torres Posse House, the stone box establishes a perimeter that is away from the notion of a free facade and the size of the openings is related to the support of the loads. The idea of the free plan is therefore housed inside the stone perimeter, allowing it to be autonomous in the layout of a relatively demanding program.

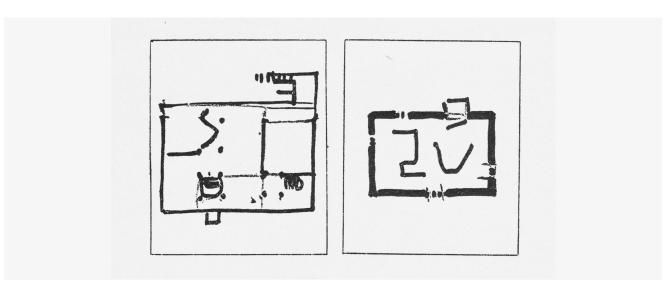
Inside, the level of the land is used to define three planes half a level apart, which, while resolving the functional organization, the three levels propose a spatial configuration



62 Eduardo Sacriste, Torres Posse House, Tafí del Valle, Argentina, 1957-1958 photo c.1963. © Julio Middagh Archive.

03 Eduardo Sacriste, Torres Posse House, Tafí del Valle, Argentina, 1957-1958, plans from *Summa*, No. 1, Buenos Aires, Ediciones Summa sa, 1963.





Od Comparison between Villa Stein-de-Monzie, Garches, (Le Corbusier, 1926-1927) and Torres Posse House (Eduardo Sacriste, 1957-1958), the architectural idea, a box closed to the outside with freedom of movement inside, from Summa, No. 1, Buenos Aires, Ediciones Summa SA, 1963.

marked by the meeting point of the entrance, the stairs, and the circulation. This configures a spatial system that grants the total height to be recognized and strengthens the horizontal dimension of the house. Concerning the small rooms, "in the shape of a train carriage," 20 a line of low cupboards was arranged in the corridor which, in correspondence with the double-height space, left the roof slab visible.

Thus, the vision of such a limited space is charged with spaciousness, a perception that is reinforced by the change in direction of the volume, which in the horizontal movement announces the continuity of the rooms. The spatial system is regulated by a clear and effective recognition of the human scale.

Although the assignment was to build a simple house for the summer, the time it would be used would be long and therefore it had to accommodate the requirements of family life for almost a quarter of the year. The memories of the protagonists speak of a house designed only for minimum needs, as well as of a space lived to the full: "We were outside all the time, in full sunshine. The bedrooms were only used for sleeping." The experience of life in the house verifies the success of the typological conformation: "Our favorite place was the gallery; a little further away were the horses…"²¹

Sacriste had argued that "the house has to be designed with the exclusive purpose of achieving a product suitable to the way of life and the economic conditions of its future occupants," 22 giving a fundamental role to the lived space in the design. Attention to the way of life allowed overcoming mechanistic rationalism in favor of human ideals of an organic architecture. As Bruno Zevi (1918-2000)²³ had proposed, with the organic movement the fundamental attention was shifted towards the spatial conception, in which space was not only a figurative category, but the place of individual and collective social life.

Architectural idea, materiality, durability

"It is not about looking for an original idea but finding the architectural idea that will solve the problem posed," Sacriste said.²⁴ This one was not supposed to be arbitrary or unjustified, but reached through effort, intuition or experience, and was closely linked to the creative capacity.

Beyond the intelligent solution of the program and the adaptation of the stone box to the topography, the architectural idea integrally assumed in this house an organic approach based both on spatiality and orientation, materiality, and durability, as if it were a conceptual advance of the notion of sustainability.

The house proposes an impression of unity, establishing harmony between the parts and the whole. Sacriste recognized that this house owed a debt to Wright's Jacobs II House (1946-1948),²⁵ emphasizing the sense of a unique space.²⁶ The debt is registered in the cut, in the double-height, in the elimination of the limits between the lower and upper spaces, and in the vision of the continuity of the roof.

The climate was fundamental in the conception of the dwelling. In his texts, the architect highlighted: "The climate is par excellence the determining factor of architecture:

similar climates, similar architectures,"²⁷ he argued, stating that the project should solve the problems caused by the environmental conditions to achieve interior comfort.

The break in the volume at an angle of 135° (degrees) allowed the orientation to be optimized; both sectors benefit from good sunlight entering from the north; the gallery opens completely in that direction and the living area is resolved with generous double doors for the same purpose. On the contrary, as the dominant wind is from the south, the openings on this facade are more controlled. "The openings must hardly be opened to ventilate the rooms. The north is warm and cheerful." In the gallery both decisions are synthesized: the north side has no limit and the south side incorporates a glazed opening that ensures views and wind control.

Materiality supports the organic conviction of the house. The owner chose the stone because it was more advantageous than the adobe wall: it did not have to be plastered or painted and was much more durable.²⁹ The architect likely shared the decision, as he incorporated new features in the use of this ancestral material: the 30 centimeters (cm) wide walls that make up the box were worked flush in the interior, using a wooden formwork and a binder mixture. The visual result is more pleasing than that of the exterior, where the split ball stone with taken raked joints generates an effect of greater solidity and strength.

Reinforced concrete is present in the roof slab, a low-cost solution for that time. The drawing of the wooden formworks transmits expressive force inside, indicating the two main directions. In the context of the massiveness of the stone, the slab of the roof appears as a contrast in its lightness.

The roof was of particular concern; covered with earth and grass, it aimed to conserve interior heat during the winter and reduce exposure during the summer. ³⁰ But, besides, the green roof was proposed as a fifth facade: "Seen from the top of the valley, the roof blends in with the land." ³¹

The presence of the stone also took on other meanings. A huge rock found on the site was brought in at the beginning of the construction and cut for use. A portion of it was arranged as the upper frame of the fireplace and the most important portion was installed – prior to the construction – in the living room as a big sofa, in a corner next to the fireplace. It is clearly an *objet trouvé*, a playful gesture, a different note. It echoes a surrealist attitude that had been felt in some areas of the local *avant-garde*.³²

Sixty years after its construction, the durability of the materials has allowed this house to be in a good state of conservation. With minimum maintenance, it has remained without substantial modifications. The gallery, the most memorable space for the family, continues to be suitable for the multiplicity of social practices. A clear observation of the habits and customs give it a place of hierarchy in the spatial organization.

The organic notion that initially emerged from the conception of the house as a "tailor-made suit" has transcended as a value. While the definition of the original program may seem a major limitation, the rigidity of the box, as well as the rich internal spatial dynamics, represent possible starting points for adaptive re-use.



O5 Eduardo Sacriste, Torres Posse House, Tafí del Valle, Argentina, 1957-1958, Sacriste and the owners in the living room; Josefina sitting on the "found" stone.
© Julio Middagh Archive.

O6 Eduardo Sacriste, Torres Posse House, Tafí del Valle, Argentina, 1957-1958, interior view, the organic spatial conception, articulation of the different planes and levels. © Carolina Ramos, 2014.



Eduardo Sacriste, Torres Posse House, Tafí del Valle, Argentina, 1957-1958.
 Photo Carolina Ramos, 2014.



Eduardo Sacriste, Torres Posse House, Tafí del Valle, Argentina, 1957-1958, view from the site, the horizontal line of the slab appears clearly in the landscape.
© Photo Carolina Ramos, 2014.



Eduardo Sacriste, Torres Posse House, Tafí del Valle, Argentina, 1957-1958, south facade, view from the road. © Photo Carolina Ramos, 2014.

Only the green roof has presented repeated problems since construction, associated with the effects of the thermal amplitude of the site. The house has been preserved as it was; it is the integrity of its conception that makes it heritage.

Its material definition implied durability. Stone had been used by Le Corbusier in the Errazuriz House (1929 -1930) as an approximation to the vernacular vocabulary; Wright associated it with the locality, but the way it was worked referred to his own search; Henry-Russell Hitchcock (1903-1987) and Philip Johnson (1906-2005) had accepted it only as a surface material for modern architecture, rejecting any suggestion of mass and weight.³³

In the Torres Posse House, the stone indicates weight and permanence. Its material resolution confirms the relationship with the landscape, rejects the obsolescence of modern construction methods, but also the one of the modern image. The selection of the stone by the owner came from a practical idea - which dismissed the need for maintaining facades and interiors – that opposed to the impact of weathering: for the architect, this overcame the rationalist image and modern architecture's idea of remaining pristine. At the same time, the material choice recognized - in accordance with the integral design - that the house was not an aesthetic object that should remain untouched, but fundamentally a place for life. The house eloquently reveals itself as an architecture capable of planting itself firmly in the virtue of the material to resist the passage of time and, paradoxically, to age without conflict.

Modern house, design and place

The house represented for the architect a field of experimentation to define a type that he continued to deepen in the following years in his summer houses. It synthesizes the modernity projected and conceived from the location; this has transcended the pragmatic and incorporates the natural and human dimension in the design conception, where the experience of the domestic space becomes a central argument.

The gallery distinguishes the type: it comes from the local tradition, but it is reinterpreted and clearly integrated, not as an extension of another room, but with its own dimensions and characteristics of use. It is a living space in which the experience of rest, leisure, and contemplation of the landscape is synthesized.

It is a modern house because the requirements are resolved in rational terms, organizing a plan consistent with the demand for economy and the conditions proposed by the place, climate and orientation. The commitment to the topography of the site was key, as was the integration of materials – the stone walls and the reinforced concrete slab – which enabled the abstract form to be overcome. On the inside, the light gives life to a material as hard as stone, and on the outside, the shadows of the roof mark the surface of the walls, while the presence of the slab and eaves give it "unity of form." The material option for the stone does not refer to a problem of language, but to weathering resistance and as the prolongation of its life, in synthesis, to the overcoming of time.

The house transcends because it was made to fit the family, shaping the living space of the time of rest, thus embodying the sphere of essential joys and contributing to the formation of a new type. It transcends because the design strategy valued the definite configuration of the box in relation to the freedom of the floor plan. It transcends because of the durability of its material choices, and because fundamentally, even in its modern conception, it appeals to stone as an eternal material that places it outside of time.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- Sacriste was a very well-known architect and professor who is widely recognized in the historiography of Argentine architecture: Olga Paterlini, Eduardo Sacriste, Buenos Aires, Clarín, 2014.
- Eduardo Sacriste, "Acerca de mis primeras obras modernas", Summa, No. 220, Buenos Aires, Ediciones Summa SA, 1985, 31.
- The Ferro House, in Mar del Plata (c.1936), and the rental building in Callao Avenue and Quintana, in Buenos Aires (with D. Duggan, 1938) are two of the best examples he designed at that time.
- 4 The Austral Group was initially formed by Jorge Ferrari Hardoy (1914-1977), Juan Kurchan (1913-1972), and exiled Spanish Antonio Bonet (1913-1989). All of them had worked for the Buenos Aires plan with Le Corbusier. They were joined by Jorge Vivanco, Horacio Caminos, Hilario Zalba (1912-1995), Simón Ungar (1912-1971), Alberto Le Pera (1913-1990) among others. See Jorge Liernur, Pablo Pschepiurca, La red austral, Bernal, Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, Prometeo Libros. 2008.
- 5 Antonio Bonet, Jorge Ferrari Hardoy, Juan Kuchan, "Voluntad y acción", Austral, No. 1, sp., from: Nuestra Arquitectura, No. 119, Buenos Aires, 1939.
- 6 Carlos Coire, Eduardo Sacriste: El hombre y su obra, Buenos Aires, Universidad de Morón, 2005.
- 7 Eduardo Sacriste, Usonia. Aspectos de la obra de Wright, Buenos Aires, Ediciones Infinito, 1960.
- 8 They would be joined later by: Hilario Zalba, Alberto Le Pera, Rafael Onetto (1915-1967), Eduardo Catalano (1917-2010), and Jorge Bruno Borgato (1918-1985). See: Horacio Torrent, "Radical Pedagogies: Instituto de Arquitectura y Urbanismo, Tucumán, Argentina", in http://radical-pedagogies.com/search-cases/a11-instituto-arquitectura-urbanismo-tucuman-argentina/.
- 9 Sacriste took part both in teaching and in the memorable design of the university city that Banham considered as the first megastructure of modern architecture. See: Reyner Banham, Megastructure: Urban Futures of the Recent Past, London, New York, Harper & Row, 1976.
- 10 Between 1952 and 1957, he taught at the London Polytechnic, Tulane University in the USA, and the Bengali Engineering College in Calcutta.
- Eduardo Sacriste, Buildings footprints, The Student Publication of the School of Design, Raleigh, North Carolina, 1959.
- 12 Eduardo Sacriste, "Obras en Tucumán", Summa, No. 1, Buenos Aires, Ediciones Summa s.A., 1963, 37.
- In 1950, Enrico Tedeschi made a minimal stone cabin for himself;
 Margarita Roesler Franz (1915-1974) had designed the wooden house
 she shared with Cino Calcaprina, always remembered as a very cold
 place; Hilario Zalba did the same somewhat later, using adobe. In
 the same place, Sacriste had projected in 1947 a sanitary station, and
 later he built two other houses. See: Ricardo Viola, Plano de Tafí del
 Valle, Municipalidad de Tafí del Valle, 1999; Enrico Tedeschi, "Casa en

- Tafí del Valle", *Nuestra Arquitectura*, No. 381, Buenos Aires, 1961, 21-23; Camilo Galetti, "Recuerdos de mi abuelo Hilario Zalba", *47 al fondo*, Year 6, No. 7, La Plata, 2000, 3-5.
- 14 Eduardo Sacriste, op. cit., 37.
- 15 Olga Paterlini, interview with Felipe Torres Posse, Luisa María Torres Posse and Fernando García Hamilton, Tucuman, 11 August 2020.
- 16 Eduardo Sacriste, Qué es la casa, Buenos Aires, Editorial Columba, 1968, 33.
- 17 The house has been highlighted only in the history of modern architecture in Argentina. See: "Eduardo Sacriste: la obra de un maestro", Summa, No. 220, Buenos Aires, Ediciones Summa sa, 1985, 24-78; César Pelli, Julio Middagh, et al. "Eduardo Sacriste Casa Torres Posse", Revista 1:100, Buenos Aires, 2016; Alberto Petrina, El arquitecto Eduardo Sacriste. Un maestro de la modernidad criolla, Museo de Arte Hispanoamericano "Isaac Fernández Blanco", Buenos Aires, 1995.
- 18 Eduardo Sacriste, Charlas a Principiantes, Tucumán, Facultad de Arquitectura y Urbanismo, Universidad Nacional de Tucumán, 1961. In 3rd edition Buenos Aires, EUDEBA, 1976, 18.
- 19 Eduardo Sacriste, "Idea Arquitectónica", Summa, No. 1, Buenos Aires, Ediciones Summa SA, 1963, 53-54.
- 20 Eduardo Sacriste, "Obras en Tucumán", Summa, No. 1, Buenos Aires, Ediciones Summa s.A., 1963, 38.
- 21 Olga Paterlini, Interview with Felipe Torres Posse, Luisa María Torres Posse y Fernando García Hamilton, Tucuman, 11 August 2020.
- 22 Eduardo Sacriste, Qué es la casa, Buenos Aires, Editorial Columba, 1968, 28.
- 23 Bruno Zevi, "Della cultura architettonica", Metron, No. 31-32, Roma, Sandron Editore, 1949, 18-26.
- 24 Eduardo Sacriste, "Idea Arquitectónica", Summa, No. 1, Buenos Aires, Ediciones Summa SA, 1963, 53.
- 25 Eduardo Sacriste, "Obras en Tucumán", Summa, No. 1, Buenos Aires, Ediciones Summa s.A. 1963, 38.
- The Jacob II House had been recognized and analyzed by Sacriste as a clear example of Wright's Usonian house strategy. From: Eduardo Sacriste, Usonia. Aspectos de la obra de Wright, Buenos Aires, Ediciones Infinito, 1960. Recent edition: Eduardo Sacriste, Frank Lloyd Wright, Usonia, Editorial Librería Técnica CP67, 105.
- 27 Eduardo Sacriste, Charlas a Principiantes, Tucumán, Facultad de Arquitectura y Urbanismo, Universidad Nacional de Tucumán, 1961. In 3rd edition Buenos Aires, EUDEBA, 1976, 104.
- 28 Eduardo Sacriste, "Obras en Tucumán", Summa, No. 1, Buenos Aires, Ediciones Summa SA, 1963, 38.
- 29 Idem.
- It assumed a solution concerning some pre-existing building traditions and which the architect applied in other works, as in the case of the García House, in San Javier. See Ferré, María Ana. "Três casas de pedra por Eduardo Sacriste". From: IV Seminario docomomo Sul, Porto Alegre, Faculdade de Arquitetura da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, 2013; Villavicencio, Susana, Casa García Bernasconi (1966). From: Paterlini, Olga, Eduardo Sacriste, Buenos Aires, Clarín, 2014, 96-101.
- 31 Sacriste, Eduardo, "Obras en Tucumán", Summa, No. 1, Buenos Aires, Ediciones Summa SA, 1963, 38.
- 32 It was clearly proposed in the manifesto of the Austral Group as liberation from established truths, and as a lesson to appreciate the men and women protagonists of architecture in its most complex dimension. Was also referred to by Gómez de la Serna in 1944, in the pages of Tecné, the magazine in which Sacriste had collaborated. Bonet Antonio, Ferrari Hardoy, Jorge, Kuchan, Juan, "Voluntad y acción", Austral, No. 1. From: Nuestra Arquitectura, No. 119, Buenos Aires, 1939,

- sp. Gómez de la Serna, Ramón, "Surrealismo arquitectural", *Tecné*, No. 3, Buenos Aires, 1944, 149. Sondereguer, Pedro, "Proyecto moderno y circunstancias nacionales en la Argentina de 1940. El grupo 'Austral' y la revista Tecné", *América: Cahiers du CRICCAL*, No. 4-5, 1990, 431-438.
- 33 Henry-Russell Hitchcock; Philip Johnson, The international Style: Architecture since 1922, New York. Norton & Co. New York, 1932.

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 Ediciones Infinito, 1960, recent edition: Frank Lloyd Wright, Buenos Aires, Nobuko, 2006.

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