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Responses to Walter Gropius. Dialogues around the historic city. The questions raised by Fernando Chueca in “Historic cities (a drama of our time)”

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[...] it is useless to establish whether Zenobia is to be classified among the happy cities or the unhappy ones.

It is not in these two species that it makes sense to divide the city, but in two others: those that continue through the years and mutations to give their shape to desires and those in which desires either succeed in erasing the city or are erased from it.¹

(Calvino, 1972: 41-42)

Abstract

This text analyzes Fernando Chueca's article “Las ciudades históricas (Un drama de nuestro tiempo)” published in 1965 in the Revista de Occidente in response to the article published a few months earlier in the same magazine by the Bauhaus master Walter Gropius, contributing his vision of the destiny of the historic city. Gropius' ideas regarding this argument were also taken into account by Leonardo Benevolo, an Italian architect and historian whose professional figure is comparable to Fernando Chueca, to whom Gropius' ideas also served as a starting point to formulate his reflections on a pressing problem in Europe in the 1960s: the progressive destruction of the urban fabric of historic centers.

This text analyzes three practically contemporary texts, the one published by Walter Gropius, “Urban environment and planning” (1965), which gave rise to Fernando Chueca's essay “Historic cities (A drama of our times)” (1965), as well the one published by Leonardo Benevolo in 1957 in the journal Ulisse “La conservazione dei centri storici e del paesaggio.” These essays provide different reflections on the problem of the insertion of contemporary architecture in monumental ensembles, the necessity for citizen education, and political intervention in urban planning, issues that are still key today in addressing the problem of the continuity of historic cities.

Keywords: *historic cities, Fernando Chueca Goitia, Leonardo Benevolo, Walter Gropius.*

¹ Original quotation: “[...] è inutile stabilire se Zenobia sia da classificare tra le città felici o tra quelle infelici. Non è in queste due specie che ha senso dividere la città, ma in altre due: quelle che continuano attraverso gli anni e le mutazioni a dare la loro forma ai desideri e quelle in cui i desideri o riescono a cancellare la città o ne sono cancellati.”

Introduction. The validity of the ideas

As Ascensión Hernández (2019)² pointed out, the questions that the architect Fernando Chueca Goitia expressed in his article “Las ciudades históricas (Un drama de nuestro tiempo)” published in the *Revista de Occidente* in March 1965,³ which we will analyze in this article, as well as other texts that address the problem of the conservation of historic cities, are still very topical today, even though more than half a century has passed since their publication.

In his essay, Chueca develops this highly complex argument in a series of questions and ideas, posed in the form of an open response to Walter Gropius, whose reflections on the historic city had been published in the same magazine months earlier;⁴ These conclude in what could almost be called a “call to arms” at various levels: cultural, social and state-based, in the interests of the active and militant defense of the preservation of historic cities, understood under the precepts that Chueca would continue to develop throughout his professional life.⁵

During the time that has passed since Chueca expressed his ideas, different thinkers, architects and urban planners have attempted to respond in some way to the issues raised in his article, in the form of essays, congresses and meetings of different range and scope, or with their architectural practice. This has not only confirmed the validity of some of the questions he raised but also, as Chueca himself anticipated, the difficulty in finding an answer to a problem that is becoming more and more pressing if we take into account the relatively recent phenomena of gentrification, abuse by mass tourism and the “museification” of some cities.

In this ever present condition of open debate, intrinsic to the discipline of architectural conservation and restoration, for which there are no univocal answers, it seems appropriate to take up his considerations and bring them in line with those expressed in the same years by Leonardo Benevolo, also in response to Walter Gropius’s reflections on the historic city published in the collection of essays *Architettura integrata*.⁶

The reading of both texts that reflect, among other arguments, on the introduction of new architecture types in historic centers following the precepts of the modern movement helps one to understand the scope of this controversy better and approach it from different perspectives.

In the same way, the re-reading of Gropius’ text, one of them recently proposed again in the same publication,⁷ recovers a valuable reflection on the future of historic cities, an issue that, as we have pointed out, is still without a clear solution. What is more, in the over five decades that have passed since the writing of these texts, we could affirm that the questions that in their conclusions, converging in a certain way as we will see, these three great theoreticians of architecture pointed out as a possible way of action to propose a sustainable future for historic centers, are still valid.

² Ascensión Hernández has presented a complete analysis of Fernando Chueca’s work in relation to the historic city in *Las ciudades históricas y la destrucción del legado urbanístico español. Fernando Chueca Goitia* (Hernández Martínez, 2019).

³ The text of this article is taken from Hernández Martínez (2019). References to quotations used here follow this publication.

⁴ The article “Urban environment and planning” by Walter Gropius was published in volume 23 of the *Revista de Occidente* in February 1965 and re-published in volume 453 of the same journal in February 2019. References to quotations used in this text follow the 2019 publication.

⁵ See Hernández Martínez (2019).

⁶ *Architettura integrata* is a collection of texts published by Walter Gropius in 1955 reflecting his experience at Harvard. It was first translated into Italian in 1958 at the initiative of Bruno Zevi and published in 1959 by Arnoldo Mondadori.

⁷ See Gropius (1965) and the more recent publication Gropius (2019).

Walter Gropius' text "Urban environment and planning"

In February 1965, the issue 23 of the *Revista de Occidente* published the text "Urban environment and planning," signed by the Bauhaus master Walter Gropius. It was published together with the texts of Francisco Giner De Los Ríos "Letter to Ortega", P. José M. González Ruiz "Christianity and demutization," Tibor Déry "The circus" and Marc Sieber "Anti-colonialism."

The writing was based on a reflection on the "lack of education and the aesthetic-visual incapacity" (Gropius, 1965: 5) of the citizens, a factor that the architect considered one of the greatest obstacles for contemporary urban planners and architects, and that undoubtedly affected the problem of monumental ensembles. This was an argument that, at that time, constituted a pressing problem for architectural practice; this problem had to resolve the issue of the conservation of historic cities in the face of the accelerated process of post-war economic and social transformation that was taking place at that time.

Gropius reflected on the shift that had taken place from a value system "centered on the local and enclosed within national borders to the free world of exchange of experience, research and material goods." He noted that one of the results of this paradigm shift had been the consideration of art and architecture as superfluous disciplines, retained as a luxury. The architect, in turn, replied that they were, in fact: "The deeply rooted and spontaneous expressions of people who shared a common code, and could be trusted to respond appropriately whenever one of its members raised their voice or hand to employ them in a creative work"⁸ (Gropius, 1965: 6).

He developed this idea by explaining how this paradigm shift had thus detached tradition from the production of new arts and architecture, indicating that the result was the destruction of the coherence and unity of the urban environment, manifesting:

Let it be said that we have temporarily lost direction and that continuity, culturally understood, is threatened; only the determination and courage to live in line with the conquests of our mind, to practice what we believe, to unite what threatens to separate, and to choose the living and not the exhausted vein, can help us push tradition and continuity into the future⁹ (Gropius, 1965: 10).

He pointed out that even the most enlightened minds could fall into the temptation of "galvanizing the vestiges of the past to force them to participate in the activities of the present"¹⁰ (Gropius, 1965: 10), raising the question of what should be preserved and what should be demolished, alluding that it was an issue that obsessed "all cities proud of their past"¹¹ (Gropius, 1965: 10). For Gropius, it was necessary to study case by case since no single solution to these problems could be found. He pointed out that the idea of preserving certain urban structures that did not meet current needs, monumentalizing them, would end in failure if the citizens did not share the values that had made such urban organization possible in the face of the need to allow "the irruption of the instruments adjusted to their current way of living, be it vehicles or buildings"¹² (Gropius, 1965: 7).

⁸ Original quotation: "La expresión hondamente arraigada y espontánea de gentes que compartían un código común, y se podía confiar que respondería debidamente siempre que uno de sus miembros alzase voz o mano para emplearlas en una labor creadora."

⁹ Original quotation: "Dijérase que hemos perdido la dirección temporalmente y que la continuidad, culturalmente entendida, se halla amenazada, únicamente la determinación y el valor para vivir en consonancia con las conquistas de nuestra mente, para practicar lo que creemos, para aunar lo que amenaza con separarse, y para escoger el filón vivo y no el exhausto, pueden ayudarnos a impulsar la tradición y la continuidad hacia el futuro."

¹⁰ Original quotation: "galvanizar los vestigios pretéritos para hacerlos participar en las actividades del presente."

¹¹ Original quotation: "todas las ciudades orgullosas de su pasado."

¹² Original quotation: "la irrupción del instrumental ajustado a su actual forma de vivir, trátase de vehículos o de edificios."

This reflection represents the maturity of Gropius' thinking in comparison to other earlier texts such as "Cities' Renaissance" (Wagner and Gropius, 1943), written together with Martin Wagner, where the authors showed a preference for the construction of new neighborhoods and urban agglomerates following the principles of the modern movement and the implicit abandonment of historical centers, focusing the problem on merely economic aspects and advocating interventions that rehabilitated the cities: "along the sound way of perennial renewal according to the specific needs of the city and in accordance with ever-changing technological developments" (Wagner and Gropius, 1943: 28).

Gropius's proposal in this essay focused on finding architectural solutions to propose in the historical centers that would flee from the dazzling¹³ effect of the new contemporary architectures and represent models "fundamental and susceptible to development, growth and repetition"¹⁴ (Gropius, 1965: 8).

He pointed out as examples the street layouts of rue Rivoli in Paris, Beacon Street in Boston and the city of Bath in the United Kingdom.

He then went on to criticize the contemporary practice, pointing out that architects had ceased to deal with those areas of the historic city that, for the Bauhaus master, required architecture harmonized with the environment, which he called "gray" in his text (Gropius, 1965: 8). These had begun to be developed by commercial builders. When they had acted, they had used a variety of forms and techniques that had failed to maintain the rhythm and a mutual relationship with the pre-existing buildings.

Recognizing that the battle for unity had been practically lost at that time, he pointed out another problem that he considered fundamental for the development of the historic city: the private ownership of land and the obstruction this situation posed to the sensible development of the city.

Gropius argued that the right of the community should prevail over the right of the individual and that, therefore, the right to expropriate should be established, pointing out that a possible future development to solve this problem would be that, instead of perpetual individual property rights, the right to receive a royalty for life or for limited periods of time should be established.

Faced with the centralist position of urban planning at that time, he advocated that a central figure of power should not carry it out but from collective participation in planning decisions, where the center would be the citizen, a "cultured public"¹⁵ (Gropius, 1965: 8). He urged architects to avoid the temptation to act as "soloists" and to realize an architecture "carefully composed and free of stridency"¹⁶ (Gropius, 1965: 8) that could constitute a unifying element of urban planning, indicating that in the historic city the goal should not be regimentation, but harmonious integration.

¹³ This discourse is reinforced by the statement "Padecemos el estorbo de nuevos hallazgos personales más o menos brillantes que no pueden luego encajar en el ambiente arquitectónico, digno y mesurado, dotado de un estilo más bien impersonal y colectivo" ("We suffer from the hindrance of new, more or less brilliant personal discoveries that cannot then fit into the dignified and measured architectural environment, endowed with a rather impersonal and collective style") (Gropius, 1965: 8).

¹⁴ Original quotation: "fundamentales y susceptibles de desarrollo, crecimiento y repetición."

¹⁵ Original quotation: "público culto."

¹⁶ Original quotation: "cuidadosamente compuesta y libre de estridencias."

He ended his reflection by returning to the idea with which he began the text: that it was necessary to educate citizens in the appreciation of contemporary art and architecture to guide their cultural interests and promote a group consciousness that would allow the development of an urban environment that was both characteristic of contemporary times and harmonious with the past.

Fernando Chueca's response: "Historic cities (a drama of our times)"

Fernando Chueca's essay adopted in some of its passages the form of a reply to Walter Gropius' text which, as he himself indicated in his article, was the trigger for his:

Furthermore, an article by Walter Gropius, deeply pessimistic about the urban environment of our cities, was published in the Revista de Occidente; coming from such an author, it has greater importance and significance, and that article is partly the cause of this text. Suppose Gropius, the great renovator of our visual environment, the man who only a few years ago trusted the relationships of an architecture and an urbanism that he had promoted, feels perplexed. What will become of those of us who already had numerous doubts? (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 123).

The article, formulated as a response, reflects the fluid thinking of the Spanish historian, who acknowledges having written it "without method, but with compassion and to clarify our distressing circumstances" (Chueca, 1965: 132).

With the title "Historic cities (a drama of our time)," Chueca began by stressing the universality of the problem posed by preserving the historic city in relation to progress, which, according to him, could not be solved with state provisions, which he considered a "necessary but insufficient" complement (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 124). From the beginning of his reflections, Chueca proposed, along the lines of Gropius' text, that a "culture and citizen education" was what was necessary to face this problem (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 124). As an extension to this first approach, he cited in his article that international organizations such as the UNESCO and the Council of Europe "have taken action in the matter" (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 124), highlighting the declaration contained in the report on "La Défense et la mise en valeur des sites et ensembles historiques ou artistiques" by the Vienna professor Ludwig Weiss.

At the very moment in which Europe acquires an unprecedented economic and social momentum, and because of this momentum, the protection of the remnants of its past becomes an urgent necessity. Not only are the threats multiplying in direct proportion to this development, but the significance and importance of the threatened sites and monumental centers is becoming more evident every day (Weiss, in Chueca Goitia, 1965: 124).

The architect emphasized in his reflection that one of the great problems was the preponderance of technicians in all spheres of society, who only thought of "moving forward" (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 124) without stopping to think, to reflect on what was being done. He added to this situation the excessive bureaucratization, which in his opinion, worsened the matter. He proposed adopting a militant position "not going against this evil, is letting such evil prevail" (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 125). For Chueca, confronting the destruction of historic cities required reasoning about the whys and wherefores of this situation and debating it: "we should not fear finding the underlying cause of our thinking, just as we should not fear that others will find theirs and contradict us" (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 125).

To understand the reasons that were leading to the destruction of monumental cities, first of all, Chueca established a parallel between the destruction of the urban fabric of the historic city and cellular degeneration, indicating that unlike what happened in the field of biology, in the case of cities, we could know the causes of this degeneration “so many, so complex, their mutual relationship and dependence so intricate, that we get lost in their impenetrable labyrinth” (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 126). This which he synthesized in the idea accompanies, enlightens and educates, illustrates and educates” (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 126) the citizen, and where “the memory of noble deeds persists, and the outstanding achievements of his ancestors continue to live” (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 126) but that it had passed to an instrumental relationship with the city, in which it was seen as a place at the service of the capitalist system. For Chueca, this was one of the first causes that needed to be addressed, changing society’s mentality through active education.

He reinforced this idea of the need to educate the citizen and take a militant position, citing the article by Walter Gropius, whose ideas, however, he considered to belong to an “an old ideology, which [the modern movement] has to support” (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 127), stressing that he kept faith that an intelligent education and some drastic measures could transform the current situation. In his response to Gropius, Chueca focused on refuting that the visual education that Gropius claimed as one of the solutions was not enough, indicating that Gropius demanded education should also meet other objectives that were not merely functional.

As we have seen, the Bauhaus master put “the problem of what is to be preserved and what is to be demolished”¹⁷ on the table (Gropius, 1965: 7), pointing out that it was a question that at that time and for which he recognized that there was no general answer. Gropius proposed that the conservation of “the old” could only be achieved “in places where the resulting decrease in productivity and habitability can be compensated”¹⁸ (Gropius, 1965: 7). One of the ideas he pointed out was to avoid “conservation for conservation’s sake”¹⁹ (Gropius, 1965: 7), which would lead to the mistake of creating “dead and museum islands”²⁰ (Gropius, 1965: 7).

One of the possible ideas proposed by Chueca to respond to this situation was the creation of new cities that would alleviate these problems and respond to these needs, but without creating urban agglomerations around historic cities if these could jeopardize their relationship with the landscape, citing as an example the case of Toledo (Spain) and the proposal for its expansion, which he considered a mistake. He specified that these new cities should not be created around historic cities and their landscapes but in other less connoted places, adding that “humanity to make this attempt, considering from the beginning that this new city will soon cease to be new and will, in turn, begin to live as a historical entity” (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 130). In other words, the architect was more in favor of creating new cities that would become new historic cities than of creating extensions or new neighborhoods in historic cities.

The second aspect that Chueca answered to Gropius was that to achieve contemporary cities “functionally irreproachable and, moreover, beautiful, harmonious and orderly” (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 127), it was necessary to abandon the cities in which they had lived until then and “leave some as museums for tourists” (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 127), as Gropius himself warned, raising the question that these new cities would also one day become obsolete. To reinforce his ideas Chueca, quoting Francisco Benet in his study of the Islamic city (Benet, 1963), contrasts the parallax method (the transfer to other newly founded, more functional

¹⁷ Original quotation: “el problema de qué es lo que se debe preservar y lo que ha de demolerse.”

¹⁸ Original quotation: “en lugares en los que la disminución de la productividad y la habitabilidad resultante pueda quedar compensada.”

¹⁹ Original quotation: “conservar por conservar.”

²⁰ Original quotation: “ínsulas muertas y de museo.”

cities) with the palimpsest method, where the contemporary city overwrites the historic city. Chueca clarified later in his article that he was not opposed to the creation of new cities, but to their substitution.

On the idea anticipated by Gropius that the historic city could thus become a kind of museum, he further objected that "if the monumental cities belong to the entire humanity, they do not, therefore, cease to belong to their children and in that serious scrutiny, who is to inform dwellers of this or that locality that their city is bound to perish?" (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 128).

According to the Spanish historian, Chueca then delved into the relationship that the inhabitants establish with the city and the need for these to facilitate the rootedness achieved, thanks to the relationship that the city maintains with history.

He summarized the causes of the degeneration of historic centers in "ignorance and contempt" (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 133) of the citizens towards the historic city and the supposed incompatibility of contemporary life with the historic city.

He, therefore, proposed that the only possible solution for this coexistence was that of "conservation with a dose of transformation, greater or lesser depending on the case" (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 134), that is, to combine segregation, the creation of extensions, as long as these did not interfere with the historic landscape, with a rewriting, a transformation of the cities, that did not attack their form and that affirmed the "sameness of the city, the best that it is" (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 134). We will see later what solution the architect gave to this affirmation of the very character of the city.

He contradicted Gropius once again, asserting that it was not true that old cities were unsuitable for modern life, reinforcing that they were "very sweet to live in, as long as their structure is not abused" (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 134).

To achieve this coexistence, Chueca pointed out that heights and volumes should be maintained, with some exceptions, and that the uses to be installed in urban centers should "yield to the type of building and not vice versa, as it now happens that the building has to yield to uses for which it was not intended" (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 135).

For Gropius, the problem of the insertion of the new architecture in the urban context had to be approached from an aesthetic point of view, pointing out that exemplary architectural achievements that were not in the proper context could also be a "hindrance"²¹ (Gropius, 1965: 8) and appealed to a diffuse aesthetic culture, also in buildings considered minor in street layouts, to prevent these spaces from being occupied by structures that did not achieve "a common rhythm or close mutual relationship"²² (Gropius, 1965: 8), i.e., he advocated greater freedom when acting in urban centers, as long as an aesthetic balance could be maintained.

At this point, it is also worth recalling the ideas that in those same years, Cesare Brandi had expressed on the insertion of architecture that could be called "neutral" in the historical fabric so as not to contrast with the surrounding environment and on the insertion of another type of architecture, that designed according to the principles of the modern movement.

This idea of neutral tone, a concept developed for pictorial restoration, is referred to in Gropius' text as the "gray" areas (Gropius, 1965: 8), for which the founder of the Bauhaus proposed solutions that, from contemporary architecture, were harmonized with the environment and were susceptible to development, growth and repetition, that is, that found in their compositional foundations a resonance with the surrounding environment.

²¹ Original quotation: "estorbo."

²² Original quotation: "un ritmo común o una estrecha relación mutua."

Brandi, in his well-known *Theory of restoration* first published in 1963, stated in his reasoning on "Preventive restoration" that in the face of the possible insertion of these "neutral" architecture:

The reasoning behind a proposal to replace an unimportant building in a monumental context with a modern one of the same size, height and color, is only apparently logical – in reality it comes down to a sophistry. The substitution occurs with a building that has the right to call itself architecture, or with one that does not. If the building does not qualify as architecture, it is clear that it cannot justify the destruction of a status quo, which historically continue as it is (for the historical can give way only to the aesthetic) (Brandi, 2005: 83)

On the other hand, regarding the possibility of inserting in the historic center's buildings of contemporary architecture, designed following the principles of the modern movement, he stated:

if the building is felt to qualify as architecture (that is art), given the contrasting spatial qualities that personify modern architecture, the insertion of truly modern architecture in an ancient context is unacceptable. Therefore, whether we are speaking of real architecture or not, the alteration of an ancient architectural environment by replacing parts that make up its connective tissue cannot be permitted. This tissue, albeit amorphous, is still of the same period, and has historical validity (it is obvious that among these hypotheses, none have even touched upon 'stylistic falsification') (Brandi, 2005: 83)

This position, considered by many as *passeistic*, actually left the door open to the insertion of another type of architecture, one that, unlike that produced supposedly under the principles of the modern movement, whose break with the past was programmatic, could include in its spatial conception, proper integration with the historical architecture; in other words, that architecture that, from a contemporary language was nevertheless sensitive to the context and the spatiality required by the surrounding buildings.

As we have seen, the conclusion reached by Chueca in his text on the introduction of new architecture and extensions in the historical city was that it should promote the application of the explained methods of parallax and palimpsest. These, in turn, should be applied with "great tact and intelligence"²³ (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 134) to allow the conservation of the historical city with an admissible part of the transformation that would not make it lose its essence, reiterating that the city should not leave its planning in the hands of economic dictates.

Chueca continued in his text by stressing that the state of crisis the historic cities had reached was due to the lack of awareness of the current citizen about the importance of the city, alleging that "This latent plebiscite, for which the majority condemns the city without knowing what it is and what it means, is the one that can end one of our most fabulous spiritual riches if we do not face it with a minoritarian, but powerful patriotic outcry"²⁴ (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 132).

The solution proposed by Chueca was, in line with Gropius' thinking, the education of the citizen, in which he argued that it was necessary to involve the most prestigious intellectuals, who up to that moment, according to the historian, had been "sparing in the estimation of visual culture without understanding the dangers that its dullness and its progressive

²³ Original quotation: "sumo tacto e inteligencia."

²⁴ Original quotation: "Este plebiscito latente, por el que la mayoría condena a la ciudad sin saber lo que es ni lo que significa, es el que puede terminar con una de nuestras mayores riquezas espirituales, si no le enfrentamos un clamor minoritario pero de gran alcance patriótico."

disappearance entail”²⁵ (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 132-133), adding that “intellectual, absorbed by bookish and literary themes, generally remains unmoved by the growing brutality that is drying up the sources of aesthetic perception, destroying the horizon of our nearby visual world”²⁶ (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 133).

Chueca also made what could be considered a real *call to arms* of the citizens’ movement, which should defend their heritage in an increasingly cultivated and conscious way, and attacked the architects of that time very harshly, indicating that they did not have enough architectural culture, since the teaching of architecture in Spain had become too technical having been integrated into the technical schools and having left aside the teaching of history. He also alluded to a generalized attitude of the younger architects to deny the past, the culture “and even our climate”²⁷ (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 136), which did not allow them to carry out projects that were integrated into the historical context. Moreover, he considered this attitude a kind of “machismo, badly applied and of the worst style”²⁸ (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 136), alluding that the condescension toward the old was interpreted “as a weakness, as a lack of convictions, as the evidence of little creative energy”²⁹ (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 135-136). That is to say, in a certain way, he took up the idea of Gropius and of Brandi, in which underlies the idea that one should not outright reject all insertion of new architecture in historic centers but that these should be designed following the constructive and typological tradition and understanding the characteristics of the place, responding to a good project – “a construction that deserves to be called architecture” as Brandi would say.

He concluded his text with a line of thought very similar to Gropius’s, defending the extreme that, if necessary, monumental cities should be nationalized, seizing and alienating their land “for the benefit of the owners themselves”³⁰ (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 137). He proposed that the concept that should be developed was that, in reality, the owner of real estate in historic centers should be considered a “free tenant of the State for an indefinite period”³¹ (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 137) to prevent anyone from having lucrative ambitions on that land.

Other answers to Gropius. “The conservation of historical centers and landscape” by Leonardo Benevolo

In Italy, Gropius’ position on the insertion of the new architecture in the urban context was also assimilated and theorized by Leonardo Benevolo,³² an Italian figure comparable in certain aspects to Fernando Chueca. Benevolo (1923-2017) was also an architect and influential historian. They combined his teaching work at the faculties of architecture in Rome, Florence, Venice, and Palermo with his professional career, constructing buildings such as the headquarters of the Bologna Fair and making attractive urban plans such as Ascoli Piceno, the historic center of Bologna, Monza, or the new neighborhood of San Polo in Brescia.

²⁵ Original quotation: “Parcos en la estimación de una cultura visual, sin entender los peligros que entraña su embotamiento y su progresiva desaparición.”

²⁶ Original quotation: “el intelectual absorbido por los temas libresco y literarios, en general permanece impasible ante la creciente brutalidad que está secando las fuentes de la percepción estética, destruyendo el horizonte de nuestro mundo visual cercano.”

²⁷ Original quotation: “y hasta nuestro clima.”

²⁸ Original quotation: “misapplied “male chauvinism” and of the worst style.”

²⁹ Original quotation: “machismo, mal aplicado y del peor estilo.”

³⁰ Original quotation: “a beneficio de sus poseedores.”

³¹ Original quotation: “arrendatario gratuito del Estado por tiempo indefinido.”

³² Leonardo Benevolo presents in his writings interesting interpretations on Gropius’ writing, besides the one presented in this article a clear reference will also be the text of Gropius published in 1967 in *Italia Apollo nella democrazia* treated in the set of essays *L’architettura delle città nell’Italia contemporanea*, Roma Bari 1998 and in the chapter “Architettura” in *La cultura italiana del Novecento*, by C. Stajano (1996).

In 1957 he published an article³³ in the magazine *Ulisse* reflecting on a particular issue published by the Italian weekly *Epoca* in the section "Italia domanda"³⁴ in which different critics and architects were invited to reflect on the question "Having to insert a modern construction in an ancient environment, in what style you should design it"³⁵ (Benevolo, 1957: 139). Analyzing these answers, Benevolo outlined two ways to consider the problem: the first was that once the designer had received the commission, he no longer had to consider whether or not to build in that place since that decision had already been made, and he should, therefore, concentrated on how to construct the building he had been commissioned to create. In this case, Benevolo pointed out, the designer, in possession of all the data on the problem, could decide how to design his solution (the building) with a much greater knowledge of the cause than the hypothetical legislator, who had had less time to consider the solution. Therefore, the architect tended to try to escape from the regulations formulated under a general hypothesis and realized that the only real guarantee for a good project was his sensitivity.

The second way Benevolo considered was that of the urban planner, who did not consider the particular case but the general praxis. He pointed out the example that inserting a new isolated building in the center of Florence could theoretically be a good choice if a good architect did it, but that the two conditions above, inserting a new architecture and that a good architect did it, could not be maintained from a general point of view. If replacing an old building was allowed, it could not be forbidden not to do the same with the rest, and the quality of the projects to be carried out could not be controlled *a priori*. Therefore, the question of how to design the insertion of new buildings in the historical context for a town planner involved not only imposing a regulation, project links for the construction of an isolated building but also reasoning about these centers globally, in their value as organisms where each part is necessary for the integrity of the whole.

This situation opened two questions for Benevolo: the ancient environment should be preserved, and if this preservation was admissible in its relationship with the rest of the city if any demolition and reconstruction of buildings should be generally excluded, limiting interventions to internal improvements without changing the nature and character of the buildings. If, on the contrary, this environment could, or should, be sacrificed for unavoidable necessities, then it was worth "abolishing it radically"³⁶ (Benevolo, 1957: 140).

The solution proposed by Benevolo, which theoretically would be to find a point of "dynamic balance," was to analyze whether architecture should express the "individual temperament"³⁷ (Benevolo, 1957: 140) as an exercise of the architect's personality, which takes into account the surrounding environment, but produces a work capable of changing the future of the urban fabric, or whether, on the contrary, the value of the urban whole should be placed before the value of the project of each building.

Benevolo mentioned the position of Ernesto Nathan Rogers, which can be traced back to the first possibility, to let the environmental conditions, like the rest of the issues raised by the project, be assimilated from the architectural project itself on a case-by-case basis.

³³ Benevolo (1957). For the references of the quotations in this text, reference is made to the republication of this article in the book Benevolo (1970).

³⁴ "Italy asks".

³⁵ Original quotation: "Dovendo inserire una costruzione moderna in un ambiente antico, in che stile si dovrà progettarela."

³⁶ Original quotation: "abolirlo radicalmente."

³⁷ Original quotation: "temperamento individual."

To develop his arguments, the Italian historian cited the ideas of Walter Gropius, taken from the translation of a collection of texts *Architettura integrata* (Gropius, 1959), explaining that all building products should be considered as a unitary activity, which society delegates, building by building, to certain people, but that this building production, this urban fabric, had a global value that conditioned and was preeminent to that of the individual building.

Benevolo quoted verbatim the following paragraph:

*Over the course of my life, I have become increasingly convinced that the custom of architects to interrupt the prevailing fabric of uniformly dissociated architecture with a beautiful building is wholly inadequate and that instead we must seek a new order of values based on components that are capable of creating an integrated expression of the thought and feeling of our time*³⁸ (Gropius, 1959: 7).

According to Benevolo, this did not lead to denying the absolute freedom of the designer but to require him to analyze in-depth the decision-making process that must be put into action to construct a building.

Thus, on the one hand, the design of the building itself should be considered in an executive manner, and on the other hand, the project system should be formulated beforehand, on an urban scale.

He thus established that the project should be worked on at a different scale and with different time frames, which would prevent all decisions from falling on the shoulders of a single person, the designer of the building. He argued that the architect's independence could be an error of perspective since any job is, in fact, the result of a *collective work*, whose decision has been to delegate to the architect the task of designing the building. Therefore, the problem of the decisions to be taken when designing new architecture in historic centers, as Gropius proposed, should not only be the responsibility of the architect who designed the building. Still, it was a problem of urban planning and should be raised primarily at the urban scale and be mediated by "the material and spiritual components that determine the structure of the city"³⁹ (Benevolo, 1957:142).

For Benevolo, only after this formulation, and in the terms thus established, the old buildings and neighborhoods could be considered the "pre-existences" for later interventions.

For Benevolo, therefore, Gropius took up two ways of considering the problem of the insertion of the new architecture in the historic city, and defended that these were not dialectical or opposing positions. The synthesis, he reaffirmed, was to be found in the second tendency, which for Benevolo was the main thesis of the modern movement, "which understands the legitimacy of the first tendency and places it in the right light"⁴⁰ (Benevolo, 1957: 142).

According to this line, modern culture had come to recognize, in increasingly decisive terms, the impossibility of solving the problem of coexistence between the ancient and the modern at the architectural level, relying on the sum of individual constructive initiatives, and considering historic centers as unitary organisms. Therefore, applying the precepts

³⁸ Original quotation: "Nel corso della mia vita mi sono sempre più convinto che la consuetudine degli architetti di interrompere il tessuto prevalente dell'architettura uniformemente dissociata con un bell'edificio è del tutto inadeguata, e che piuttosto noi dobbiamo cercare un ordine nuovo di valori basato su componenti che siano in grado di creare un'espressione integrata del pensiero e del modo di sentire del nostro tempo."

³⁹ Original quotation: "los componentes materiales y espirituales que determinan la estructura de la ciudad."

⁴⁰ Original quotation: "que comprende la legitimidad de la primera tendencia y la coloca en la luz correcta."

of the modern movement led to the reasoning that the only reasonable procedures were integral conservation or destruction (Benevolo, 1957: 142). And hence, as we have seen, the considerations of the impossibility of introducing modern architecture in historic centers were raised by Cesare Brandi.

Benevolo pointed out that when faced with the need to decide whether a historic center should be fully preserved or demolished, which had been gradually making its way, two objections had to be considered.

The first consideration raised by the Italian architect was that all epochs have freely transformed the urban environments received from previous eras, that palimpsest of which Chueca speaks. In contrast to the extreme conservation, or the apparent simplification of the problem that could be "historicizing" contemporary contributions, Benevolo objects that at this time, the relationship with the past, unlike what happened in previous periods, the current situation was centered on a critical and historical reflection on the past, rather than on the "immediacy of a tradition"⁴¹. Still, Benevolo defended that the contemporary era should also leave its legacy in the city, but this legacy could not deny its contemporary duty to dialogue with the need for conservation, unlike what had happened in previous historical times.

On this idea, he affirmed:

[...] since conservation is not a random fact, it must be achieved through a series of organized interventions. Is it an artificial fact? Certainly, but no more than the other reflexive decisions necessary to guarantee the orderly development of our cities. Here lies the real difference between our era and previous ones: the different weight that reflexive action has acquired, compared to immediate action, is the need to go through planning to arrive at freedom⁴² (Benevolo, 1957: 143).

He clarified that this situation constituted neither a title of superiority nor a reason of inferiority of the contemporary epoch and did not authorize an absolute opposition to past ages because we have arrived at the present situation through a continuous series of well-defined, documentable passages. He indicated that whether this instance of preservation was a definitive or transitory fact and that it might be that in the future, it would not be a primary subject at that time, it could not be dispensed with.

The second objection raised by Benevolo was that:

Preserving ancient architecture means immobilizing every empty space since the social functions for which it was used and which are an integral part of its reality have irremediably disappeared. This abstract, aesthetic claim isolates from the living body of architecture only one component -the figurative one- ignoring the others. In the best-case scenario, we will obtain museum objects, neighborhoods, and museum cities, not real cities and real neighborhoods⁴³ (Benevolo, 1957: 144).

⁴¹ Original quotation: "inmediatez de una tradición."

⁴² Original quotation: "[...] poiché la conservazione non è un fatto spontaneo, occorre ottenerla con una serie di interventi organizzati. È un fatto artificioso? certamente, ma non più che le altre decisioni di ordine riflesso occorrenti per garantire l'ordinato sviluppo delle nostre città. Qui sta la vera differenza tra la nostra epoca e le precedenti: nel diverso peso che l'azione riflessa a acquistato, rispetto all'azione immediata, è nell'esigenza di passare per la pianificazione, onde arrivare alla libertà."

⁴³ Original quotation: "Conservare le architetture antiche significa immobilizzare ogni spoglia vuota, dal momento che le funzioni sociali a cui servivano, e che sono parte integrante della loro realtà, sono irrimediabilmente tramontate. Si tratta d'una pretesa astratta, estetizzante, che isola dal corpo vivo dell'architettura una sola componente -quella figurativa- ignorando le altre. Nel migliore dei casi otterremo oggetti da museo, quartieri e di città museo, non vere città e veri quartieri."

Benevolo pointed out that one of the keys to achieving the permanence of historic centers was to consider that buildings, and architecture, can accommodate different functions over time without their formal components being necessarily linked to the original function. He, therefore, advocated taking into account the multiple possibilities that the architectural project could explore when designing a new use for a building without these transformations entailing the loss of the building's individuality and character.

He argued that the modern movement itself had contributed to weakening the Romantic concept that the work of art was a fact concluded in itself, perfect, and not subject to further development, since under the perspective sponsored by the modern movement, the project was seen as essentially continuous research, without a conclusive moment, where the interruption is decided at a specific moment to move on to the execution of the work. For Benevolo, the decision to cease design research was instead a decision not of an aesthetic nature but of a moral order, when the designer decides, as a man, that he must separate the work from himself and begin to make it live in physical reality.

For Benevolo, preserving a building or a group of buildings meant containing the potentially unlimited transformations within the limits that the building or neighborhood needed in order not to lose its essence. Therefore, the objective when intervening in historic centers should be to maintain the concordance between formal and functional elements, explaining that in this case, when the project was carried out, the order of the factors should be the opposite of what happens in new construction. In these, the architect pointed out an initial economic and social reality to which the architectural project gave form. In historic centers, the physical form was already given, and it was the project that had to provide them with an economic and social base compatible with their formal values.

Benevolo pointed out that this operation, as is evident, could only be carried out on an urban or territorial scale, organizing the city so that the old districts would have a destiny, if not identical, at least similar to the original, and the action of conservation could acquire plausible economic support.

He immediately pointed out that there were places where this operation was not possible, and in that case, he returned to what he had stated at the beginning of his reasoning; in those cases, either he resigned himself to their loss, or the historic centers had to be conserved as "museum objects" (Benevolo, 1957:142), also alluding that it was a situation that occurred for other artistic objects, such as paintings, sculptures or objects of applied art, and therefore this situation of "museification" should not be excluded. He also added that this decision should be made taking into account the city as a whole, in which these museum objects, these ruins, perhaps no longer belonged to it in a functional sense but in a psychological sense and, therefore, the operation of isolating them, although artificial, could be natural and inserted into the urban discourse.

Benevolo closed his article by raising a fundamental question that for the problem of the conservation of historic centers to arise, they had to continue to exist. With this reflection, he introduced the situation in Italy at the time, in which a great debate on the conservation of historic centers⁴⁴ was taking place, since the destruction and threats to artistic and landscape heritage were increasing at a frenetic pace and, according to Benevolo, required practical interventions to counteract them.

⁴⁴ A result of this intense debate in Italy was the so-called *Charter of Gubbio* which can be accessed at the Associazione Nazionale Centri Storico-Artistici (1960) [<https://www.ancsa.org/la-storia-e-larchivio/la-prima-carta-di-gubbio-1960/>] (accessed on 27 November 2021).

He reflected on the irreversibility of these loss situations and that the traditional mechanisms of heritage protection were no longer valid. It was necessary to find new ones that would make it possible to curb the situation.

He proposed that work should be done along two lines of action, one long-term and the other emergency, pointing out that until definitive and organic measures were approved, provisional measures were necessary for which organization, if necessary, would be sacrificed for the sake of expediency.

He pointed out that the most common mistake was to think that society moved at the same speed as the cultural avant-garde and that the system of these ideas was transferred as it was to a concrete reality.

He proposed that the modern movement had opposed academicism, which promoted a rigid and abstract cult of the old, contrary to ideas such as that the monument is inseparable from its environment and architecture inseparable from its social functions. Conservation is a dynamic and not a static factor, which were critical concepts of the Modern Movement. These ideas, avant-garde at the time, according to Benevolo, had been misinterpreted by society, accepting the negative part, i.e., the polemic against academic conservation, before having understood its positive aspect, i.e., the need to develop new and more modern habits of respect for the old.

Benevolo recalled with great irony that history taught us not to underestimate these interpretations of formal order, even if erroneous, that had acquired a prestige capable of silencing direct opposition and mentioned as an example some urban planners who in the past had completed operations of *sventramento* or isolation of buildings in old cities that at that time avoided re-proposing these solutions directly and spoke of "intangibility of historical centers to be able to propose the construction of their new buildings in historical contexts. The architect drew a parallel with totalitarian regimes, which, unlike before World War II, now felt the need to proclaim themselves democratic and to organize elections from time to time to conceal their true intention.

He indicated that these architects now had to act "undercover"⁴⁵ (Benevolo, 1957: 147). According to Benevolo, they had used their opposition to academicism and its idea of conservation to make common opinion unfavorable toward the protection of historical centers and allow them to carry out their projects.

Chueca addressed this problem at the beginning of his article, seeing it from the perspective of the power of the technicians, who did not stop to reflect on the meaning of the interpretation of progress:

The same will happen with the technicians as soon as they feel anointed from the start, and therefore without the need to advance. Thinking will lead them nowhere, and fidelity to certain myths, formulas, and an aversion to certain taboos will suffice to guide their behavior (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 124).

After his reflections, Benevolo pointed out that the conclusion was that legislation could not be based on the goodwill of the people, nor could it be applied with too much elasticity, leaving a margin of interpretation that, for Benevolo, would surely result in the application of the least effective for the protection of historic centers. For this reason, he proposed that the emergency procedures respond to two characteristics: that they should have autonomous

⁴⁵ Original quotation: "a cubierto."

functioning and respond to central State authority rather than to local authorities, indicating that in the long term, it would be possible to promote legislation closer to the citizens, but that more time was needed for this solution to be satisfactory.

He resumed the discourse of setting limits to private property, which according to Benevolo, should be led by the State, pointing out that, on many occasions, the difficulties presented by the negotiation with private owners represented for local administrations a relief when facing the problem of drafting and implementing an urban plan.

He argued that what should actually happen was that the local administrations, who were the right ones for the partial visions and the particular competencies to control each other, should reflect the initiatives coming from the citizens. The state should assume the general guidelines, which according to Benevolo, could only be seriously solved by state action.

The convergence of ideas

The analysis of these texts leads to some common points of reflection between Benevolo and Chueca in the light of their readings and interpretation of Gropius' reflections on the historic city.

On the one hand, having developed Gropius' ideas, both theorists converge on the need to reason regarding the uses that can be given to buildings in historical centers and see this reasoning as one of the fundamental keys to the survival of the historic city. Both highlight the fundamental idea that the uses to be introduced in these spaces should be adapted to the existing typology and not the other way around. Reasoning that, although it seems absolutely logical, during the following decades was constantly threatened by the so-called *façadism*, a phenomenon that was widespread in Spain in the decades immediately following the writing of Chueca and that still survives in many cities. To understand this phenomenon, we can cite the reflections of Antón Capitel (2009) on how *façadism* derives from an environmentalist consideration, wholly detached from typological observation. The external form of the buildings is maintained, in only one of its dimensions, that of the elevation, to later eliminate the rest of the building and project a completely new one that will only have a link to adapt to the height and the spans (not always) determined by the existing façade. This operation denounces the shortcomings of many of the urban planning laws that were developed after the entry into force, twenty years after Chueca wrote his article on the current *Ley del Patrimonio Histórico Español*,⁴⁶ which, in most cases, are developed through planning instruments that protect only the alignments, heights, the so-called environment of historical centers, allowing these operations to be carried out, which we could almost define as legal *sabotage*, that even paradoxically maintaining the same original use, residential on the upper floors and commercial on the ground floor in most cases, actually lead to the destruction of the historic building.

Chueca already pointed out that during the period of democracy in Spain, it was widely adopted throughout the country that "palaces and large houses can accommodate house organizations, corporations and public buildings"⁴⁷ very well (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 135). However, as Javier Rivera points out, it should be borne in mind that many of these intervention projects would years later overrule the indication "The non-intervention and non-violation of historic buildings by State institutions, in the parameter that it is as important to conserve elevations, floors and typologies and consequently, uses and functions"⁴⁸ (Rivera, 1990: 29), referring to the interventions that were being carried out at that time in Spain. This position showed that Spanish institutions, in their "intention to monumentalize themselves

⁴⁶ Law 16/1985, dating from 25 June, Ley del Patrimonio Histórico Español.

⁴⁷ Original quotation: "palacios y casonas pueden alojar muy bien organismos, corporaciones, edificios públicos."

⁴⁸ Original quotation: "La no intervención ni violentación de los edificios históricos por las instituciones del Estado, en el parámetro de que tan importante es conservar alzados, como plantas y tipologías y en consecuencia, usos y funciones."

by occupying monuments”⁴⁹ (Rivera, 1990: 29) were actually destroying and altering a large part of these, denying their significance as new and young institutions that lacked, by these operations, content by seeking old and ancient signs as if they could not guarantee their reason for being, so they chose to manipulate the historical past in their favor.

This situation and other similar ones that have been occurring with the refunctionalization of the historic buildings of the historic centers in the five decades since the writing of the texts we have analyzed falls directly on the decisions of intervention that are taken when carrying out these projects, which are not the subject of this article. Still, it should be noted that Chueca, whose work as assistant architect of the III Zone in the service of the General Directorate of Fine Arts is still little known,⁵⁰ also pointed to this argument in his text, which already pointed to this problem as part of the circumstances that characterized the Spanish architectural panorama:

This spirit has even contaminated the very architects in charge of the restoration and conservation of our monuments, who sometimes feel a bit ashamed of their mission and want to cover it by showing that they also know how to be modern. And they do this by being untimely and out of place. As it is, why should we be surprised by what is happening? (Chueca Goitia, 1965: 136).

The three thinkers also agreed on the need to opt for a legislative solution that would safeguard the general interest in conserving historical centers to the detriment of private property rights and the uncontrolled actions of real estate speculators. Through different proposals, the transversal conclusion was that the local population had to be involved to a greater degree in the defense and safeguarding of historic centers through various political and legislative mechanisms, but bearing in mind that this population also needed a higher level of education and culture, for Gropius predominantly visual, but also of a critical and reflective nature, as Chueca and Benevolo pointed out.

The joint analysis of these three texts, which revolve around some of Gropius’ reflections, provides a vision that we could consider less utopian and more linked to the specific case of two countries such as Spain and Italy, with an unquestionable wealth of heritage and which at that time were trying to find a solution to the pressing problem of the destruction of historic centers as a result of the economic development of those years, is particularly interesting today.

The nearly six decades that have passed since their writing do not represent, however, a loss of validity of the issues raised; still and always, as we have indicated at the beginning of this article, without a solution related to the intervention project, which must be resolved case by case, as noted in these teachers.

The legislative instruments and, above all, the education of citizens, and architects themselves, to understand the importance of heritage conservation and the ability to move skillfully in the tradition and history of our cities are still an unfinished business that, in these nearly sixty years, has produced both exemplary cases and resounding failures.

Returning to the reflections expressed by Fernando Chueca is not only a valuable exercise for Spain and Europe but also for South America and Asia. Precisely the urban development of this continent, which already gave rise to the very interesting reflections collected in the *Anywise* (Davison, 1996) conference, has recently triggered the thoughts of one of the most

⁴⁹ Original quotation: “intención de monumentalizarse a sí mismas al ocupar monumentos.”

⁵⁰ Ver en las referencias los estudios sobre este aspecto del perfil profesional de Fernando Chueca realizados por Ascensión Hernández.

resonant architectural theorists of the moment, Rem Koolhaas, who states in his article on the paradox of the protection of architectural heritage “Preservation is overtaking us” motivated by his recent commissions in China, which increasingly protect more recent buildings, going so far as to protect newly built architectures. Koolhaas sees in this situation an opportunity provided by legislation and international currents on the preservation of the past, since it is the only area where, in a general case where for the architect many mediocre architectures are being produced that threaten our lives, the philosophy of preservation still allows architecture to reflect on the production of quality buildings, since, in this paradoxical situation, one has to decide beforehand what to build for posterity, since it will be preserved.

A provocation of the Dutch architect who sees in conservation an origin of quality architecture, and after reading the three proposed articles, always returns to the debate on the quality architectural project as one of the fundamental axes that can ensure the future of our historical centers, demonstrating that the ideas contained in the three articles analyzed are still on the table when facing the future of the monumental cities.

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HISTORIC CENTER OF ZARAGOZA (SPAIN). Reflection of the building of the Palacio de la Diputación of Zaragoza (1840) in the curtain wall of the seat of the Banco BBVA (1970s). *Image: Carlos Ruiz Bazán.*

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