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INVESTIGATING AND WRITING ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY:
SUBJECTS, METHODOLOGIES AND FRONTIERS

Papers from the Third EAHN International Meeting

Edited by Michela Rosso

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Michela Rosso (ed.)

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INVESTIGATING AND WRITING ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY: SUBJECTS, METHODOLOGIES AND FRONTIERS

6.5.4 Emili Blanch Roig and Modern Architecture: Catalonia and Mexico

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ABSTRACT

On 22 May 1942, the architect Emili Blanch Roig disembarked at the port of Veracruz. He was just one of over twenty thousand Spanish refugees who arrived in Mexico, fleeing the Fascist repression of General Franco and the horror of France during the German occupation under Hitler. Emili Blanch studied at the Barcelona School of Architecture and played an active role in the renewal of architecture and the approach to avant-garde European trends in Catalonia during the 1930s. The proclamation of the Spanish Republic and the Catalan Republic in April 1931 ushered in new policies to provide dignified housing for the working classes, modern urban planning in designing the city, the building of public amenities, and the protection of cultural heritage. The military uprising led by General Franco in July 1936 and the Fascist victory over Catalonia in January 1939 towards the conclusion of the Spanish Civil War marked the end of all dreams of renewal as well as the start of the nightmare of repression for the supporters of the Republic. Fleeing reprisals and retaliations, half a million Republicans crossed over the border into France. The demographic, social, and economic consequences of this exodus were compounded by losses of cultural significance, as many of the exiles were writers, philosophers, teachers, artists, and architects. The talent lost to Catalonia and the rest of Spain would make major contributions to the countries that hosted the refugees. During this period, some fifty architects left Spain. Many had been part of the architectural renewal group and would later introduce the new trends to their host countries. In this paper, we will analyse the professional career of Emili Blanch Roig (1897-1996) and his role in the introduction of modern architecture in Mexico.

KEYWORDS

Modern, Avant-Garde, exile, Mexico

EMILI BLANCH AND CATALONIA DURING THE SECOND SPANISH REPUBLIC (1931-9)

Emili Blanch (La Pera, Girona, 1897) graduated from Barcelona School of Architecture in 1925. His fellow students Francesc Fàbregas, Raimon Duran, Ricardo de Churruga and Germán Rodríguez Arias were to play leading roles in the Catalan architectural renewal of the 1930s as members of the Group of Catalan Architects and Technicians for the Progress of Contemporary Architecture (GATCPAC) under the leadership of Josep Lluís Sert. Their aim was to promote contemporary avant-garde European trends based on functionalism, the absence of superfluous decoration, and the rupture with historical architecture.¹ The GATCPAC soon had over eighty members, but many others, including Emili Blanch, although not actually affiliated (often because they did not live in Barcelona city, where the group was based), shared its ideals of modernising the country in the light of the new trends in European architecture by building schools, hospitals, abattoirs, covered markets, and proper salubrious housing.

In the early 1930s, these young professionals fully identified with the progressive policies of the Second Spanish Republic. For them, the proclamation of the Republic on 14 April 1931 in Catalonia and the rest of Spain would be the materialisation of a utopia of dignified housing for the working classes, modern urban planning in city design, the building of public amenities for community use, and the protection of heritage.²

Emili Blanch fully subscribed to this longing for renewal. He espoused the principles of rationalism and introduced this new type of architecture to Girona province. The Catalan government commissioned him to lead major projects for improving and modernising public services, particularly in the fields of health and education, the two basic pillars of the Republic. Emili Blanch extended the map of school premises throughout the region, and expanded and renovated the hospital network according to the GATCPAC principles, i.e., well ventilated buildings with good orientation, flat roofs, and total absence of ornamentation and grandiosity. At the same time, in his own studio, he was designing what would become the best-known buildings of his professional career: the Junquera, Blanch, and Teixidor houses in Girona, and the Reig and Guillamet houses in Figueres.³

The military uprising led by General Franco in July 1936 heralded the end of the renovation dream. Emili Blanch continued to design social amenities for the Catalan government during the three years of the Spanish Civil War. However, as the battlefield drew nearer, lack of supplies and manpower meant that an increasing number of projects never left the drawing board. All efforts were destined to creating defence works and field hospitals, both of which were under the responsibility of Emili Blanch, who was also officially

involved in protecting cultural heritage at the height of the iconoclastic violence that occurred during the first weeks of the Civil War.⁴

After the war, the Fascist victory marked the start of a strong wave of punitive repression against the supporters of the Republic. Apart from the thousands of deaths and imprisonments, everybody who was in any way associated with democratic politics was brought before the specifically instituted *Tribunal of Political Responsibilities*. Emili Blanch's political militancy and his work for the government of the Second Republic earned him a conviction that led to the seizure of all his assets, and professional disqualification and relegation that obliged him to seek work outside the peninsular territory for a period of fifteen years.⁵ In its fervour to wipe out the recent past and to find adepts for the new ideology, the Franco regime brought in civil procedures designed to punish and – above all – intimidate the vanquished, which resulted in an intense purge of professionals who had worked for the Republic. From the end of July 1939, the *Purge Commissions* set up inside the architects' associations examined the conduct of each of their members according to the parameters of the new regime. In July 1942, the professional tribunal declared Emili Blanch completely disqualified from practising architecture.⁶

EMILI BLANCH IN EXILE: FROM FRANCE TO MEXICO

By the time these sentences were passed, Emili Blanch had already travelled far from Catalonia. He was among the half a million republicans who crossed the French border in January 1939. The pre-war climate existing in Europe and the German invasion of France in May 1940 placed their lives in danger, and many of the exiles decided to avail of the facilities for crossing the Atlantic offered by the Mexican government. On 14 April 1942, Emili Blanch and his wife, Maria Batlle, left the port of Marseille aboard the *Maréchal Lyautey* bound for Casablanca, continuing their journey to Mexico on the *Nyassa*. They disembarked on 22 May.⁷

Once established in Mexico City, Emili Blanch began to work for CON-TE building company. He also opened his own studio, where he received commissions from both local residents and the large Catalan community. Later on, he set up a company called *Rivaud and Blanch Architects* in partnership with Spanish brothers José and Juan Rivaud, engineer and architect respectively. In his six years in Mexico, Emili Blanch designed over forty projects for dwellings and industrial premises, most of which displayed the rationalist repertoire he had brought with him from Catalonia. Examples of the use of modern forms of architecture into Mexico include the Emilia García house (Figure 1), the José María Fernández shoe factory (Figure 2), *Durkin Motors*

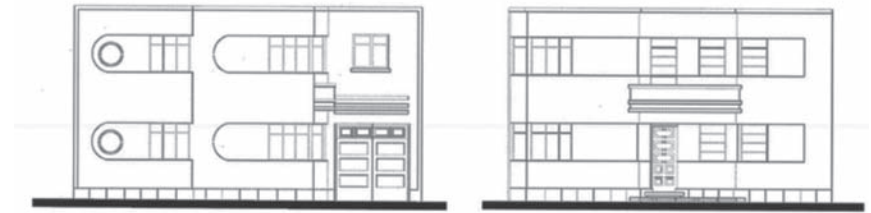


Figure 1. Emilia García house, México D.F., 1943. *Source:* Ajuntament de Girona. Arxiu Municipal de Girona

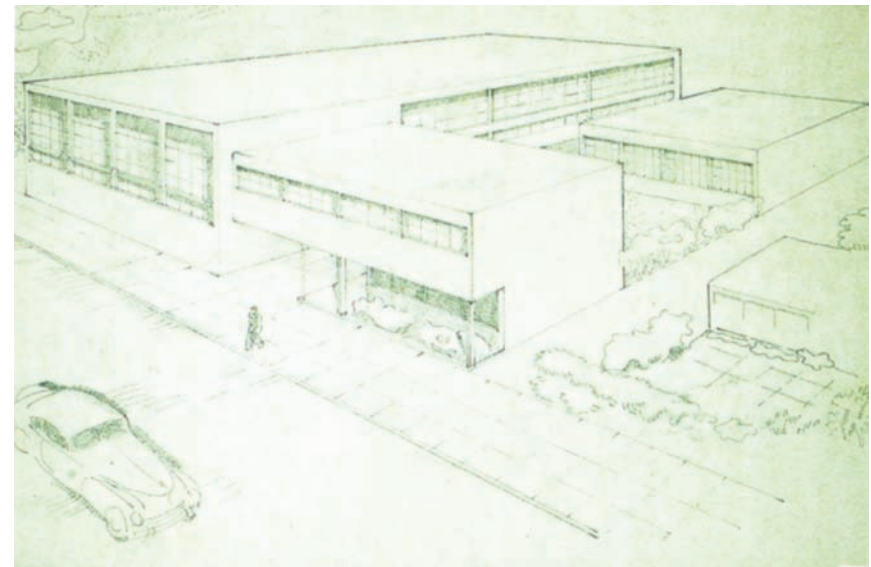


Figure 2. José María Fernández shoe factory, México D.F., 1944. *Source:* Ajuntament de Girona. Arxiu Municipal de Girona

dealers, affordable housing for *P.H. Cooperative* (with the Rivaud brothers), the Alfredo B. Cuéllar apartment block (also with the Rivaud brothers), the *Productos* business and apartment building, the Laguillo-García block, and the *Sears, Roebuck & Co.* commercial centre, all located in Mexico City. Unlike architects who stayed behind in Catalonia and the rest of Spain, Blanch and his companions in exile were able to continue practising modern architecture in Mexico. He was obliged to relinquish his avant-garde ideas in only a few projects commissioned, curiously enough, by members of the Catalan community, probably nostalgic clients who favoured a return to Catalan traditional architecture.⁸ The exiled community after the trauma

of the war and the crossing of the Atlantic created the imaginary of the “lost Catalonia”. The architectural style that best represents this image was the *Noucentisme* movement. A cultural phenomenon based on the promotion of Catalan identity. This artistic phenomenon was linked to the nation-building movement that takes place in the early twentieth century in Catalonia. The *Noucentista* postulates of a modernity that did not forsake the austerity of classicism, and included forms, colours, and materials taken from Catalan culture, with much reliance on artisan techniques. Emili Blanch uses forms of the *Noucentisme* style in the Catalan pavilion of La Feria del Libro de Mexico (1946), the Elsa Sandoval House (1946), the García Borrás House (1946), the headstone of the grave of the catalan poet Pere Matalonga (1947) and the project for the new building of Orfeo Catala (1947)

The professional success of Emili Blanch in Mexico was obvious, but it was not an exception. Mexico was a developing country that integrated the refugees quickly by offering them a life of prosperity. In addition to the support that Mexico gave República during and after the Spanish Civil War they also facilitated the arrival of refugees who received the status of political asylum seekers. Half of the fifty architects fleeing from Spain found that Mexico offered favourable conditions for developing their careers. The corollary of the deplorable drain of talent for Catalonia and the rest of Spain was the major gain for the countries that hosted the refugees. Juan Ignacio del Cueto examined the careers of the architects who settled in Mexico after the fall of the Republic, and considers that this group of largely first-rate professionals with a solid background, experience, and level of commitment contributed much to the enrichment of the country.⁹

EPILOGUE

Exile was a positive experience for Emili Blanch, as he claimed in an interview given in 1995: ‘Exile was the best thing that happened to us during the Franco period.’¹⁰ However, for Blanch and the other exiles who were hoping for a restoration of democracy in Spain after the Allies’ victory, the end of the Second World War made them aware that the Franco regime was there to stay. The realisation that exile was no longer a temporary situation made many decide to return home, including Emili Blanch and his wife, who arrived back in Catalonia in March 1948.

On his return, Emili Blanch had to face the difficult situation of having all his assets seized and of being suspended from practising as an architect. By a lucky clerical error, his professional disqualification did not appear in the archives of the Architects’ Association of Catalonia and the Balearic Islands and in 1950, he was provisionally readmitted to the association. From then

on, his activity as an architect was limited to designing some small dwellings and tourist facilities, mainly for friends and family members.¹¹ The society that received him back prevented him from attaining the same level of social and professional prestige that he had enjoyed before the Civil War. This was a society cut off from European trends, closed in upon itself, and ideologically distant from the one he had left in 1939. However, despite the adversity of the times, Blanch never renounced the underlying principles of modern architecture.

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2 Gemma Domènech and Rosa Maria Gil, *Un nou model d'arquitectura al servei d'una idea de país* (Barcelona: Fundació Josep Irla - Duxelm, 2010), 41-60.

3 Gemma Domènech, *Emili Blanch Roig (1897-1996). Arquitectura, patrimoni, compromís* (Girona: Institut Català de Recerca en Patrimoni Cultural, 2012), 26-35.

4 Ibidem, 42-8.

5 *Boletín Oficial de la Provincia*, 32 (March 14, 1940). *Boletín Oficial del Estado*, 75 (March 15, 1940).

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7 Arxiu Municipal de Girona. Fons Emili Blanch.

8 Ibidem.

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10 Mireia Costa-Pau, “L'idealisme és la millor qualitat humana,” *El Punt*, February 20, 1995, 16.

11 Gemma Domènech, *Emili Blanch Roig (1897-1996). Arquitectura, patrimoni, compromís* (Girona: Institut Català de Recerca en Patrimoni Cultural, 2012), 90-104.

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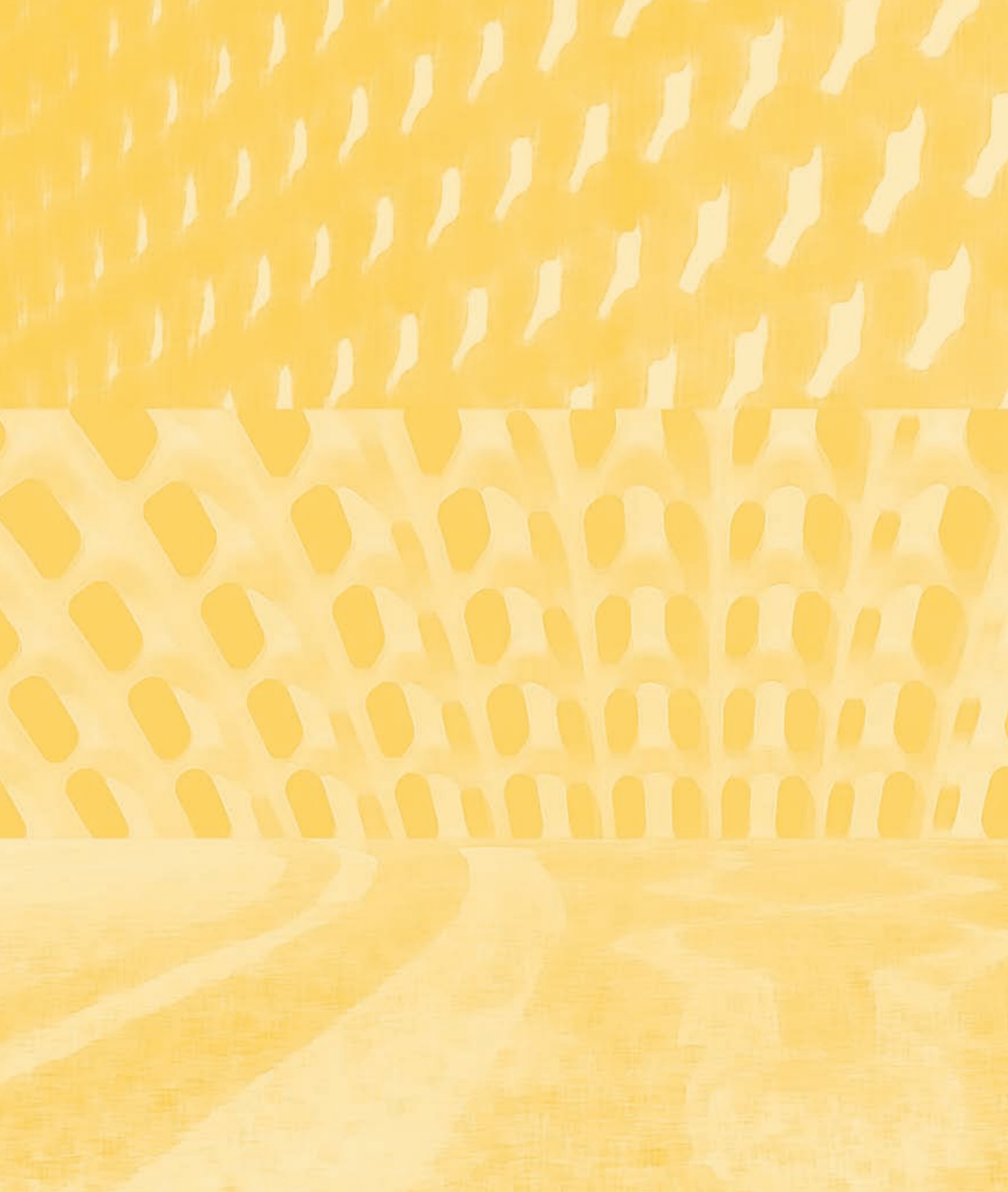
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