Los edificios de la Industria: icono y espacio de progreso para la arquitectura en el arranque de la modernidad

The buildings of the Industry: icon and space of progress for architecture during early Modernity
Industrial building forms (in all its aspects, from dams to warehouses and silos, to workshops and mills), on their eminent search for economical and spatial efficiency, became extremely evocative formal references for architects in the early stages of the Modern Movement, as Reyner Banham noticed. They also often inspired the designs of urban ordinary buildings. This took place in the Twenties in Europe, later on in Spain. On the one hand, industrial development needed new containers for which no historical references existed. On the other, state-of-the-art materials were used in an uncompromised, nude way, due of not being dedicated to habitation.

Therefore, these industrial buildings turned to be a field of experimentation of novel and progressive forms. Furthermore, the lack of references in local traditions triggered a remarkably global realm that favoured the internationalisation of architecture in general.

This way, in a last instance, industrial architecture became catalyst, reference, locus of experimentation and source of inspiration for the progress of architecture, in the formal and material aspects. Frampton, Giedion and others identified the distant roots of the Modern Movement in cast iron and engineering works, taking them as technical, aesthetic and even programmatic references; symbols of eminent functionalism as formal generative principle. Taking this argument further, an argument that nowadays is widely accepted, years after Banham provocatively stated:

“A matter of extraordinary historical importance: insofar as the International Style was copied from American industrial prototypes and models, it must be the first architectural movement in the history of the art based almost exclusively on photographic evidence rather than on the ancient and previously unavoidable techniques of personal inspection and measured drawing”.

(Banham, R. A Concrete Atlantis, Introduction, p. 18)

This photo-referentiality gives room to interesting research, in a present moment in which formalism and appearances are taken as ends, separated from function, structure and construction. This way, if with regards to the early days of the Modern Movement in Europe, Banham’s appreciation seems valid, it would be possible to consider what is the new role of images of industrial buildings for post-war architecture. As well as, what was the role of industrial architecture itself, as field of free experimentation with the risk of lacking humanness or comfort. Finally, as a question linking the previous two, up to what point industrial forms favoured formal globalisation in architecture, bearing in mind that industrial buildings were born without historical references or roots and, because of that, they were a field open to immediately incorporating the images that Banham was referring to.

Three points, therefore, are to be considered in this Conference:

1. The role of images of industrial buildings as formal references for architecture.
2. The role carried out by the projects of industrial buildings as spaces of architectural progress.
3. The consideration of industry as relevant space of globalisation of architecture.