Scale and Identity in the Housing Projects of Coderch

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Introduction

The Modern Movement, and particularly Le Corbusier, have been criticised for their making of 'complex house-simple city' (Rowe and Koetter 1984: 93)*,* a reference to the way in which the richness of the designs for private houses were lost at the urban scale. As Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter have noted:

> The public world is simple, the private world is elaborate: and, if the private world affects a concern for contingency, the would be public personality long maintained an almost too heroic disdain for any taint of the specific.

> (1984: 93)

The housing projects of the Catalan architect Jose Antonio Coderch display an intense preoccupation with this balance between the scale of the home and the scale of the city. He endeavoured to maintain the complexity and richness of the individual dwelling within his collective schemes. He saw the introduction of variety as a means to reduce the shift in scale between the individual dwelling and the city, essential to assuring that the home remained identifiable. When he presented his Barceloneta housing project to the Team 10 meeting in Royaumont in 1962 Bakema had commented that: 'In my opinion Coderch's search is towards a morality based on identification in group housing' (Risselda and van den Heuvel 2005: 178).

This paper aims to investigate this question of scale and identity in Coderch's work using the example of one project: the Banco Urquijo housing project in Barcelona, completed in 1972. The intention is to examine the way in which Coderch explores an intermediate scale in this project, a scale that is capable of relating to the historic city and that ensures that the identity of the individual homes can be maintained. This size, which is between the detached house and the urban block, allows for a small-scale form of collectivity, enabling an appropriation of the collective domain while maintaining a clear identity and boundaries.

In 1970 the Italian architect Giancarlo de Carlo, a prominent member of Team 10, wrote an essay entitled 'Architecture's Public' that began to politicise the criticism of the Modern Movement

inherent in the discussions of Team 10 over the previous fifteen years. He launched a vehement critique of the architects' role in the post-war housing boom and their complicity in providing 'cultural alibis for the most ferocious economic speculation and the most obtuse political inefficiency' (de Carlo 1992: 207). In response to the urban housing shortage they had provided remedies that reduced housing 'to the absolute minimum which could be tolerated in terms of surface and space' (1992: 207). They had, according to de Carlo, lost all sense of their wider cultural commitment and had played into the hands of the power structure. The 'brilliant solutions' that they proposed became over the proceeding forty years 'houses and neighbourhoods and suburbs and then entire cities, palpable manifestations of an abuse perpetrated first on the poor and then even on the not-so-poor' (1992: 207).

This criticism of the massive housing projects undertaken in the name of modern architecture in the post-war period underpinned the dialogues and endeavours of Team 10. The inhuman scale of the resulting environments pointed to the failings of the dictates laid down by CIAM and its promotion of modern, functional, large-scale and efficient housing. At the Otterlo Conference in 1959 Aldo van Eyck declared 'that 'rarely' had the possibilities been 'so great' for the architectural profession, but 'never' had it failed 'so badly'' (Lefaivre and Tzonis 1999: 13). The focus of their discussions and debates was, therefore, how to give meaning to a professional task centred on solving the problems of social housing and the reconstruction of cities affected by the war. In contrast to the optimism and confidence of CIAM when faced with this problem of 'the greatest number' the members of Team 10 presented a more self-effacing and modest prognosis. As Carles Fochs has described it:

> subjects under debate gradually moved away from the dream of the architect as the creator of a new world for a future society to centre on observation and proposals for intervention in the built environment and the generation of new alternatives compatible with the principles of the traditional city.
>
> (Correa et al 2006: 118)

De Carlo had argued that the post-war housing architects were too concerned with the problems of 'how' the shortage could be solved as cheaply and efficiently as possible and neglected the problems of 'why' this was being undertaken in this way. As he stated in the same essay:

> We have a right to ask 'why' housing should be as cheap as possible and not, for example, rather expensive, 'why' instead of making every effort to reduce it to minimum levels of surface, of thickness, of materials, we should not try to make it spacious, protected, isolated, comfortable,

well-equipped, rich in opportunities for privacy, communication, exchange of personal creativity, etc….No one, in fact, can be satisfied by an answer which appeals to the scarcity of available resources, when we all know how much is spent on wars, on the construction of missiles and anti-missile systems, on moon projects.

(1992: 207)

De Carlo had been introduced to Team 10 by the Catalan architect Jose Antonio Coderch and it is perhaps in this architect's housing projects that the critique of the large-scale post-war housing finds its most eloquent expression. Coderch had initially been skeptical about the architect's ability to successfully address issues of mass housing. In the discussion of the Candilis-Josic-Wood's project for Toulouse Le-Mirail at the Royaumont Meeting in 1962 he had thrown serious doubt upon whether projects of such a vast scope could lie within the grasp of the individual designer or design team:

In my limitations I think that it is very necessary for me, many times, to complete only a little thing within six months; I am able to make one thing. It is a great responsibility to compromise in this way.

(Smithson 1991: 98)

It is clear, however, that his participation in Team 10 had an increasing influence on his work, particularly in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The consideration within the group given to the importance of the architect's involvement in mass housing and the search for individual identity within these large scale proposals finds a resonance in the later work of Coderch.

House and City

Jose Antonio Coderch occupies an unusual position in relation to the prominent European architectural figures of the post-war period. He was a descendant of the Marquis de Sentmanat, a member of the Catalan nobility, and had fought for Franco during the Spanish Civil War. He was opposed to the egalitarian ideas of the Bauhaus and of many of his associates in Team 10. He also operated with an essentially non-theoretical approach, being committed primarily to the practice of architecture, and was reluctant to forego his individual role. As Frederico Correa has remarked:

Coderch was never given to associations and assemblies. His individualism and his mixture of timidity and pride made him wary of categorical group declarations rendering him unable to share any idea that did not coincide exactly with his own.

(2006: 110)

His work was fundamentally concerned with the design of domestic space, involving a large number of single-family houses and a series of housing projects. The projects for individual houses were used to develop Coderch's ideas about the arrangement of domestic space and these ideas were then transposed to the larger proposals. As Luis Girbau has described it:

Coderch's entire work can be read as an uninterrupted and persistent development of his reflections on the one-family home and just as his best critics have pointed out, the most complex multi-family dwellings, hotels, touristic groupings, etc. are nothing but a manifest and affectionate edition of individualized cells.

(Girbau 1987: 22)

The project for Banco Urquijo was entrusted to Coderch in 1967.[1] The client was a Madrid-based commercial bank seeking to build it as an investment. The appointment of Coderch was made after the director and architect of the bank visited the Hotel del Mar in Palma, completed in 1964. The project involved the construction of fifty four apartments and other facilities in the affluent Sant Gervasi district of Barcelona. The site occupies a full street block and is located on the crest of a hill between the Via Augusta and the Ronda del General Mitre with a steep slope towards the south-west. The area was formerly occupied by large villas, some of which remain. The newer buildings are typically five or six storeys. Although not part of the Eixample district the block has the chamfered corners of Cerda's plan.
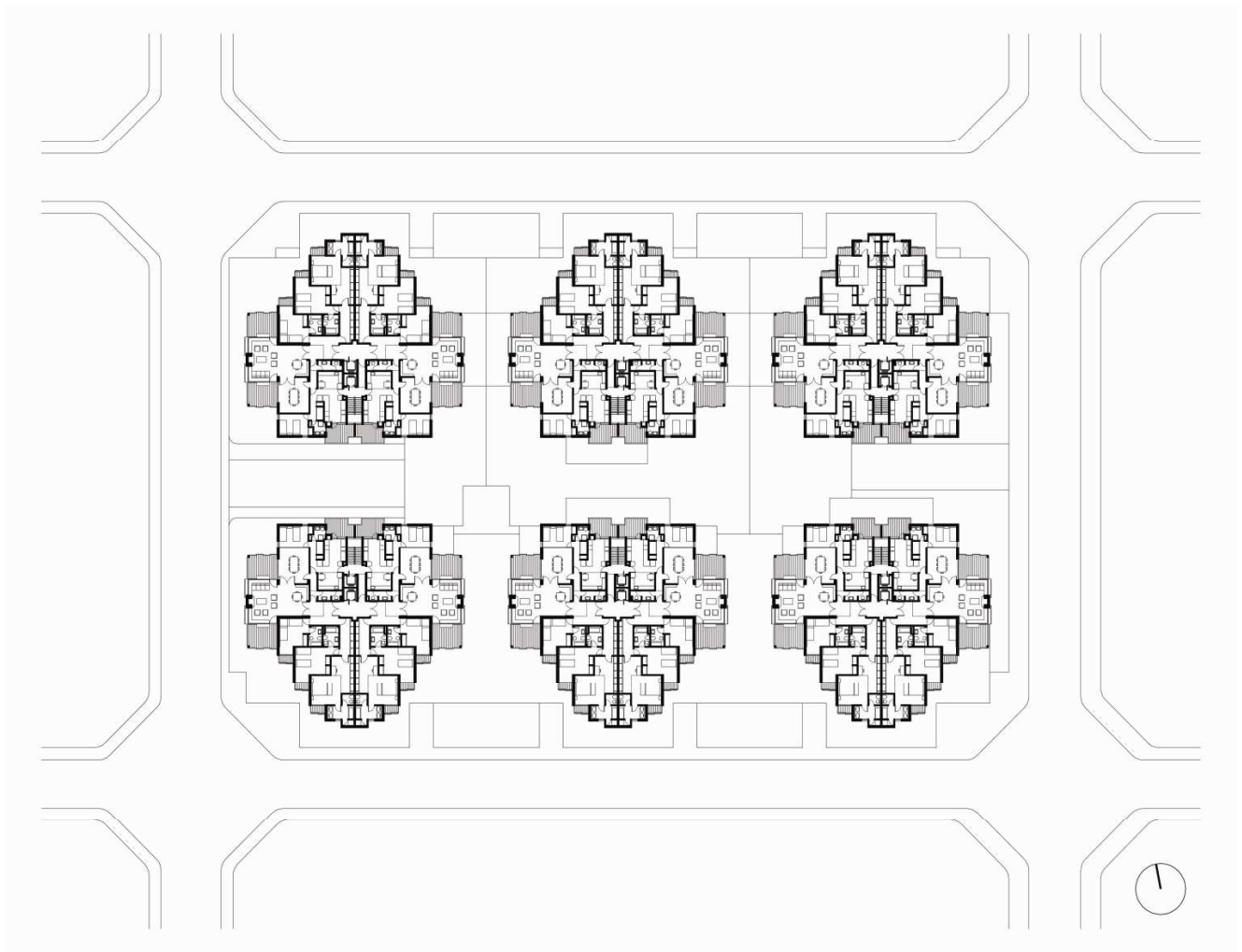
Fig.1 Banco Urquijo Site Plan (Drawing by Author)

Urban Scale

Coderch's preoccupation with scale and his critique of the post-war approach to housing is clearly evident from the initial strategy adapted for the project. The approved planning scheme for the site showed two free-standing tower blocks occupying the northern side and this was quickly rejected by the architect in favour of a medium-rise solution that would relate to the scale of the surrounding buildings. Coderch was strongly opposed to high-rise housing and declared in 1972:

> Perhaps because I suffer from vertigo, I find the idea that people should live at great heights repugnant. Nor do I agree with the type of urban developments now being built practically all of

them inspired by Le Corbusier's ideas about urban planning. I consider an error the construction of tall rectangular blocks among green spaces, for two reasons: firstly due to what I have already said about vertigo and secondly because I consider it inhuman to sit on a bench looking at what are usually monotonous blocks of 10, 20 or 30 storeys.

(Coderch 1972: 16)

This criticism of Le Corbusier and his urban planning ideas is expressed even more overtly in an interview given in 1982:

My obligation before I die is to say that Le Corbusier was a very mediocre architect, as was Walter Gropius, and their followers even more so.

(Correa et al 2006: 118)

Coderch therefore begins the project with a critique, a direct prejudice against the thinking that had dominated architectural discourse over the previous forty years. The alternative strategy involved the making of six blocks of between five and six storeys that rise up from a plinth that adapts the scheme to the slope and provides the space for a range of offices and communal facilities. The six residential blocks are all accessible from the two longitudinal streets and the space in between becomes a series of shared gardens. In this way the buildings take on the scale of a series of villas and relate directly to the surrounding fabric. As Xumeu Mestre has described it: 'Coderch did not give in to the temptation of the gigantic; the street block contains a series of buildings that do not stand out for their dimensions' (2006: 137). The staggered form of the six buildings allows them to remain identical while adapting to the chamfered corners of the block. This repetition is critical in establishing the urban scale, allowing the separate buildings to read as a coherent ensemble.

The intermediate spaces play a crucial role. The entrances to the blocks are subtly separated from the street by small lawns and are accessed from curved passage-ways that set up a generous sense of arrival and threshold. These passage-ways have views through to the adjacent entrances, making the experience a shared one. The semi-private gardens between the buildings are deliberately half-open rather than closed to the public realm. In this way the urban block becomes visually, if not physically, permeable. These glimpses through the depth of the block and the alternations in light and shade give a sense of indeterminacy to the dimensions. The project takes on the scale and intricacy of a village and in this sense feels very different from the experience of its surroundings.

Fig.2 Banco Urquijo West Elevation + Cross Section (Drawing by Author)

An appropriate urban scale is re-asserted through the use of a very limited palette of materials – terracotta tiles and vertical timber slats in front of the openings. These materials are disposed in large uninterrupted vertical planes. The language is one of wall and the absence of wall, rather than a language of individual windows and openings. This gives the elevations a more abstract and unified quality:

> Their zigzag floor plan breaks them down into vertical elements, some opaque, smooth, abstract and closer to the street, others, with openings, presenting a slight vibration, a break-down into closely related planes that illustrate the measure of the domestic, the scale of life.
>
> (Mestre 2006: 138)

These smooth vertical planes bring coherence to each element and to the whole and establish a balance between the scale of the individual room and the scale of the city block. Without these unifying planes the architectural composition would be too fragmented and would read only at the scale of the domestic. The arrangement and materiality of the elevations act to conciliate repetition and irregularity, as well as privacy and openness.

Dwelling Scale

The plans of the dwellings in Banco Urquijo are direct adaptations of a number of Coderch's single-family houses, principally the Uriach House, built in L'Ametlla del Valles outside Barcelona in 1961. These houses are characterised by a clear organisation of the house into functional zones – living, sleeping and service. Each of these zones is then allowed its own individual character without being dominated by a strong unitary concept, but are sequentially linked to create a spatial continuum. The L-shaped plan of the Uriach house forms an outdoor room, a patio that nonetheless remains half-open to its surroundings. The living areas then relate directly to this patio. The plan is also notable for the staggered arrangement of the bedrooms, providing oblique and democratic views for each of the rooms, as well as creating a more dynamic and less monotonous corridor.

In Banco Urquijo this plan is then paired and stacked to make an apartment layout. This recalls Aldo van Eyck's phrase, 'a house is a tiny city, a city a huge house' (Hertzberger 1991: 126). The private patio of the Uriach house becomes in this version an in-between space, a threshold between the public realm of the street and the private world of the apartment. The apartment is reached vertically by lift and this gives access to a generous hallway. From here there is a direct connection to each of the three functional zones. It is a plan of rooms that slip past each other, with the openings located in the corners, creating diagonal views and a rich sequence of spaces. The blocks are constructed using a Dom-ino type structural system, with columns and rigid slabs, making it possible to free the space of load-bearing walls and create this loose arrangement of rooms with an expressive plan outline.

The staggered arrangement of the bedrooms allows the apartments to effectively turn sideways to the street, exploiting the depth of the plot and avoiding the need for the interior lightwells that are commonplace in Barcelona. This plan also gives expression to each bedroom in the form, treating them as autonomous cells, identifiable units of habitation. The scale of the dwelling and the block is therefore determined by the scale of the room. This extreme articulation is tempered, however, by the recurrence of modules and by the suppression of the individual windows in the elevations. The three main bedrooms, despite differences in plan, have the same frontage dimension and identical external openings and terraces. This makes the independent cells read within an overall visual system.

Through this transposition of a plan for a tried and tested single family dwelling into a grouping of apartments Coderch attempts to overcome the dilemma posed by the disappearance of the client from these projects. This dilemma is described by Adrian Forty through the phrase 'user', common to the architectural discourse of this period:

> the 'user' was always a person unknown – and so in this respect a fiction, an abstraction without phenomenal identity…its merit is to allow discussion of people's inhabitation of a building while suppressing all the differences that actually exist between them.
>
> (Forty 2004: 312)

Coderch does not have direct access to the 'user' and therefore relies on the previous creation of a home for a private client to attempt to meet their future needs.

This dilemma at the heart of housing design is also addressed through flexibility. From the outset Coderch considered how the arrangement of the apartments could allow for sub-division or for the acquisition of part or all of a neighbouring dwelling. In this way the apartments can adapt to the changing circumstances and requirements of the households. The scale of the dwellings can shift and change according to their occupancy. The buildings become organisms and allow the 'users' to create identity through their modifications to the fabric. He sees this flexibility as essential to avoiding the monotony he so strongly opposes:

> We must emphasize this solution to prevent the rigidness imposed by other solutions and to allow, in a single volume and building, diversification in the sizes and layouts of dwellings, which adapt freely to the differing needs of future users.
>
> (Correa et al 2006: 123-4)

Fig.3 Banco Urquijo Contemporary View (Photograph by Author)

Detail Scale

The pre-occupation with scale is also carried through to the detailed construction of the building. In Banco Urquijo, as has been previously mentioned, the window, in a traditional sense, disappears. It becomes simply an absence of wall, a floor to ceiling glazed opening that is then protected by a balcony and a screen of vertical timber slats. The window is almost always in the corner of the room, opening up a diagonal view as described by Coderch:

> I use corner windows for two reasons: first of all to avoid the wall-wall trauma, that sensation of bouncing from one to another. This also makes it possible to look at the street diagonally, thus avoiding the monotonous front view of the street's full width and providing a chance to make the most of different orientations.
>
> (Soria 1979: 84)

The timber screens are made from triangular teak sections and held in thin steel frames, with the same dimensions and spacings on all the elevations. These are then used in different ways, some are hinged and can be pivoted outwards to create different levels of openness and privacy, others are fixed in front of glazing. The vertical arrangement provides the occupants with better views of the exterior while at the same time ensuring privacy by inhibiting transparency in the required direction.

These layered openings create rooms that are filled with light and yet closed, recallling the wood strip lamp designed by Coderch in 1952. Through this emphasis on the design of the intermediate spaces these dwellings become like 'a half-open organism' (Abalos 2001: 98), as the architect Saenz de Oiza has described it. Coderch combines the privacy of the traditional Mediterranean courtyard house and the modernist transparent apartment to make a new form of dwelling, capable of accommodating the physical and psychological needs of the modern household in dense urban contexts.

Close to the Ground

Team 10 presented themselves as rebelling against what they saw as 'the 'mechanistic' approach of the older generation of modern architects – Le Corbusier, Gropius, Giedion – and the postwar reconstruction schemes carried out in their name' (Lefaivre and Tzonis 1999: 9). They wished to replace what they saw as the mechanistic doctrines of CIAM applied during the postwar reconstruction with a more humanistic architecture. To this end the Smithsons had proposed the replacement of the strict CIAM Grid functional categories of housing, work, recreation and traffic with the more phenomenological categorisation of house, street, district and city:

> one lives in a place where the core group is obviously the family, traditionally, the next social group is the street (or square or green space, or any other element which by definition represents shelter or permanency), then comes the neighbourhood and, finally, the city.
>
> (Correa et al 2006: 113)

On examination of the built production of the Team 10 members, however, it is clear that many of the housing projects still bear a close attachment to the Avant Garde of the Modernist period, particularly Le Corbusier. Proposals such as the Smithson's Golden Lane or Candilis-Josic-Woods' Toulouse Le-Mirail are cloaked in a new terminology, but remain ostensibly loyal to the compositional methods of their predecessors. As Kenneth Frampton has noted:

> Opposed to the deterministic rationalism of the European Modern Movement, the Smithsons were at once caught in their Golden Lane project by the subliminal presence of a very similar rationalism and, what is worse, by an identical rationalizing process; that is, the self-same process as that which had long since been used to vindicate the deterministic projections of CIAM, which were then the ostensible target of the attack.
>
> (2002: 139)

Coderch, as has been referred to, was not influenced by Le Corbusier in the same way. He emerged from a different tradition to many of the other Team 10 members and his direct influences were Spanish, Italian and Scandinavian. The influence of Alvar Aalto provided Coderch with an escape from the rationalizing process that inhibited the Smithsons. Alan Colquhoun has described Aalto's distinct approach which was rooted in the practice of architecture:

The Modern Movement in its early phase was concerned with the general schemata by which both society and architecture could be reconstructed according to rational principles. Apparently Aalto never concerned himself with such universalism. He was content to remain "close to the ground" and to follow where his instinct for form led him.

(1981: 75)

For Coderch, as for Aalto, this capacity to remain 'close to the ground' is based on the central role given to the drawing in their design practice. The drawing becomes the means of connecting to the real circumstances of the future inhabitants, it is as Ernst Gombrich has described it: 'the means to probe reality and to wrestle with the particular' (1969: 173). The sketch drawings for Banco Urquijo that are held in the Coderch Archive all show this concern for the small scale, with the dimensions and use of rooms and with the layering and control of the rooms' enclosures. A process of constant overlay is used to make alterations and adjustments. For Coderch drawing was a process of discovery and enabled a close connection to the contingencies of everyday life. Aalto used the dictum 'to include everything' and Coderch responds to this challenge:

All those casual and temporal aspects which originate in the necessities of practical, real life, and which Mies eliminates or hides, are for Coderch genuine sources of inspiration.

(Montaner 1998: 29)

In this way it is evident that the Banco Urquijo has been designed from the inside-out. The staggered form of the buildings is sufficiently loose-fit to enable it to adapt to the developing intricacies of the interior layout. As Coderch himself described it:

House are made from the inside out, with the subconscious working on the outside, but always from the inside out.

(Soria 1979: 84)

Through this inside-out strategy Coderch endeavoured to maintain the complexity and richness of the individual dwelling within a collective scheme. He strived to make the apartments into homes in the same way as he had approached his designs for single-family houses.

In the subsequent years the parti of Banco Urquijo was tested at a series of larger scales, first in the Las Cocheras development on a nearby site and then in an unbuilt project for the Gran Kursaal in

San Sebastian. These show both the strengths and weaknesses of the approach. Whereas in Las Cocheras the predominance of the interstitial pedestrian streets gives a scale and order to the fragmented blocks, in San Sebastian this middle scale is lost and the housing becomes a kind of monumental landscape. Even in Las Cocheras, where the scale and density is significantly increased from Banco Urquijo, there is a loss of the richness of the facades and the intricacy of the dwellings. This poses the question as to ultimately how transferable this could be to addressing the real issues of mass housing and 'the greatest number' so important to Team 10. Asked about this by Aldo van Eyck at the Otterlo meeting, Coderch had responded:

> This may be an inspiration for the poor house in future. The houses for the rich are important because they become a kind of example for everybody.
>
> (Risselda and van den Heuvel 2005: 329)

This is a somewhat unconvincing answer, a kind of architectural version of Reaganomics. Considered on its own terms, however, Banco Urquijo presents a very compelling example of an intermediate scale, of a counter-proposal to the vast post-war projects that instead addresses the specificity of its location and that can relate to an existing urban context. By operating at this critical scale, between the dwelling and the urban block, Coderch develops a proposition where the coherence of van Eyck's city and house is perceptible and where each can be a vital and tangible cultural force. At this intermediate scale Coderch comes closest to this equilibrium between the home and the city and achieves, perhaps, the most convincing embodiment of the ideas of Team 10 in relation to housing design. As van Eyck remarked in an interview in 1991:

> For example, what should I say about Antonio Coderch? Except that he was the most gifted architect of the lot. A great architect. He was very emotional, he didn't argue much, a solitary figure; he was severe, morally severe, but not dogmatic; he was a puritan and catholic. He was a genius architect. He wrote the article 'It isn't geniuses we need now', but he really was a genius, a fantastic architect, an artist.
>
> (Risselda and van den Heuvel 2005: 329)

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Notes

[1] A letter from J.A. Coderch to Sr. D. Bartolme J. Buadas of the Hotel del Mar, dated 14th June 1967 and held in the Coderch Archive, describes how the director of the bank and his architect had visited the hotel and had given Coderch this commission as a result. He writes to Sr. Buadas to thank him for the trust he has always shown in him.