

# SPAIN

## The Palacio Bellas Artes in San Sebastian

### Executive Summary

The Palacio Bellas Artes was built in 1914 in San Sebastian, Spain. It is one of the earliest extant examples of a purpose-built movie palace in the Basque Country and in all of Spain. Its rich architectural, cultural and social history are a vital part of the history of San Sebastian. This was acknowledged by the building being listed as Grade I cultural heritage in the master plan of San Sebastian in 1995. It has also been declared an “Inventor Cultural Property” with a monument category by the Basque Government through a decree of March 4, 2015 (BOPV of March 6). This should have been enough to protect the building. Unfortunately, both the physical and political conditions surrounding this landmark have changed in recent years and the building is now severely threatened.

In 2014, the International Scientific Committee of 20th Century Heritage (ICOMOS ISC20C) prepared a Heritage Alert to call attention to the impending threat to the building. Rather than issuing the full Heritage Alert, letters were written by the President of the ICOMOS ISC20C and the President of all of ICOMOS, asking for assurances that the Spanish authorities would protect the building. The importance of the building was acknowledged, and the Basque government agreed to protect the site with the highest level in Spain, “BIC – Bien de Interés Cultural”. It seemed that the building had been saved. Unfortunately, the building owner, Sociedad Anónima de Deportes y Espectáculos (SADE), since requested permission from the City Council of San Sebastian to demolish the dome at the top of the building, which was granted. Not only was this one of the building’s most important characteristic features. Instead, it is now feared that this is only the beginning of the complete demolition of the building. Therefore, ICOMOS ISC20C and ICOMOS Spain are now issuing this Heritage Alert and requesting the authorities to protect and conserve this invaluable landmark of Spain.

ICOMOS Spain and ICOMOS ISC20C are asking the authorities of San Sebastian and the Basque Country to honour their previous acknowledgement of the importance of the Palacio Bellas Artes building and to protect and restore it. Future redevelopment should be encouraged but should be done in an appropriate manner that does not adversely affect the architectural, historic and cultural values of the building and the surrounding site.

### Current regulations for building protection

Until recently, the Bellas Artes Palace enjoyed the highest grade of protection granted by the municipality. It was included in a list of “permanent buildings with special planning for their protection”, which meant that for those buildings “the historical-artistic



Fig. 1: Historic postcard of the Palacio Bellas Artes (© archive of author)

values imply necessary preservation”. Moreover, in 1995 it was designated Grade I in the Master Plan of San Sebastian, a classification reserved for those buildings that “possess a historic or singular architectural value or constitute fundamental irreplaceable elements of the urban landscape and historic memory of the city”.

The current regulations that apply are part of the Special Plan for Preservation of Constructed Urban Heritage (PEPPUC), a document sanctioned after several proposals on February 27, 2014. It introduces a drastic change to previous regulations, as for the first time it removes the obligation to maintain the configuration of the inside and even allows the demolition of complete segments of the façade. On April 27, 2013, a citizen association named ANCORA requested the government of the Basque Country to declare the ‘Palacio Bellas Artes’ as cultural heritage, with



Fig. 2: Condition of the Palacio after the demolition of the dome in 2015 (© archive of author)

the object of avoiding its demolition. This application received a favourable technical report on June 6, 2013. The Vice Counselor of Culture announced the subsequent opening of a dossier of cultural qualification on May 21, 2014. Its actual opening would imply the application of a temporary protection regime, which would automatically result in the suspension of municipal licenses for demolition or new construction in the affected area (Article no. 22 of the Basque Cultural Heritage Law).

After the letters received from ICOMOS and the social press, the Basque Government decided on March 4, 2015 (BOPV of March 6) to declare the site as BCI Inventory Cultural Property with the highest monument protection category of the Spanish State. However, the property owner, Sociedad Anónima de Deportes y Espectáculos (SADE), filed an appeal against the Order and the Basque Government decided that it should be dismissed on May 26, 2015. “Coincidentally”, a short time later, on August 3, 2015, the SADE informed the City Council of the appearance of a crack in an area of the dome and proposed that it be demolished, suspecting a danger to passers-by.

The City Council, citing public safety reasons, gave SADE the order on October 8, 2015 to “remove” the dome of the building and begin the replacement. This order, however, lacked deadlines, the requirement for guarantees and the replacement project, as established by the Land Law in its article 203.2.

Between October 20 and 30, 2015 SADE demolished the dome of the Fine Arts Building and covered the building with a protec-

tive mesh – as a shroud – to give a sense of decrepitude. They failed to comply with the municipal order to replace the dome and it has not been replaced to this day. In addition, SADE filed an appeal in court against the declaration of Cultural Property by the Basque Government, and on April 21, 2017, the sentence was issued: “Agreeing the retroactivity of the administrative file to the moment immediately preceding the resolution issued, the resolution that must be issued taking into account the de facto situation of the Bellas Artes building”. In other words, the Basque Government agreed with SADE and removed the protection. An appeal could have been filed against the ruling, but the Basque Government did not appeal and decided “*to not include the Fine Arts Palace of San Sebastián (Guipúzcoa) as a cultural property with monument category*” (BOPV Wednesday, October 25, 2017). As a result, the City Council suspended the order that would have required SADE to replace the dome and freed SADE to ask for permission to demolish the building, which they have now done.

In this way, the building has ceased to be considered Cultural Heritage that is protected by the Basque Government. So, its only protection now is the municipal PEPPUC, whose Grade C classification allows for the demolition of the entire Bellas Artes building, except for the chamfer walls and the dome that no longer exists.

As a culmination of this deliberate operation of destroying the monument, the property owner, SADE, requested the City Council in 2018 to amend the General Plan of Urban Planning of San

Sebastian, with the purpose of converting the plot of land from cultural to residential use, in order to allow them to build their luxury apartments. For the time being, this request has been denied by the municipality, but there is no doubt that after the municipal elections in May the request will be made again.

## Historical and cultural significance

### *Historical and social values*

The historical and social values of 'Palacio Bellas Artes' are surely one of the most important and underappreciated aspects of the building. It was not included in the Guide published by the College of Architects, or in the urban municipal file. Only recently has the building begun to be appreciated for its true contribution as a pioneer of a new technology, cinema. Although the first screening of the Lumière brothers took place in 1895, the "theatre" did not have fixed sites in its early stages. The movies were shown in cafes, regular theatres and street pavilions. Permanent buildings designed specifically as a place to show movies did not become widespread until about 1907. Due to its early chronology this is - most likely - one of the oldest cinemas preserved in Spain, and one of the few extant examples built before the First World War in Europe.

### *Urban value*

Its urban value is very remarkable because of its strategic location and role as a city landmark that marks the city's expansion at the beginning of the 20th century. The property is of great importance because it is located on a triangular plot that is the crowning element of the so-called Cortázar Extension. It is the entrance to the city from the south. The narrow façade of the building is like a chamfer that forms an open triangular urban space in front of it. The bisector of the chamfer generates a significant compositional axis, at the intersection of Urbieta and Prim Streets where some of the best buildings of eclectic inspiration in San Sebastián can be found. "Palacio Bellas Artes" constitutes the end of this journey, closing with a bright historical and stylistic culmination. It is also an important nodal point of the city, serving as the extreme limit and prospective link between the first 19th-century urban expansion and the developments of the second half of the 20th century (Amara Nuevo neighbourhood).

### *Architectural value*

'Palacio Bellas Artes' was originally designed to house different uses (cinema hall, headquarters of the choir room and concierge). It was a remarkable and intelligent design that took advantage of a triangular-shaped site and allowed it to accommodate the needed facilities. It is a prominent building that occupies the head of a triangular block, for which it was inspired by the now-demolished Gaumont Palace at the Place Clichy in Paris. The architect, Cortázar, may have personally visited this cinema in Paris, or would have known about it through one of the many architectural publications to which he subscribed. Interestingly, it is an international benchmark which is not mentioned in the list of municipal planning. 'Palacio Bellas Artes' is not a mere copy, but a unique building with its own architectural value, whose prototype was the flagship of the French film industry with the world's largest projection room at the time. It also demonstrates the strong Parisian influence on local planning that distinguishes the city of San Sebastián. By its formal characteristics and the time of its construction, is a unique infrastructure within the Basque architectural scene.

### *Commemorative and symbolic value*

'Palacio Bellas Artes' was erected to mark the furthest point reached by the expansion of the city, a hundred years after the fire and subsequent reconstruction (1813–1913). Not surprisingly, the urban space that extends in front of the main facade bears the expressive name of Centennial Plaza. It also represents the effective culmination of a dream: the urban expansion plan conceived by Antonio Cortázar, father of the architect who designed this cinema.

### *Experiential value*

Given its centennial history and brilliant cultural past, the 'Palacio Bellas Artes' continues to enjoy great esteem among the people of San Sebastián. Proof of this is demonstrated by the 10,961 signatures that have been collected to oppose its demolition (<http://chn.ge/11Y89549>). The building has been the scene of many artistic and social activities, some of its own use and other tangential to it such as theatrical performances, musical performances, competitions, political rallies, celebrations and, of course, film screenings. This building has always had a strong familiar and popular character, being strongly rooted in the urban landscape and the collective memory of citizen's architecture. It had a very important historical role as the registered office and rehearsal location of the prestigious Orfeón Donostiarra for more than six decades (1915–1977). Nor can it be forgotten that after ceasing to function as a popular venue in 1982, it became the first head office of the newly founded Euskadi Symphony Orchestra and remained in that use until 1989.

### *Architect, date and use*

The project designed by Ramon Cortázar is dated March 23, 1914 and the construction of the 'Palacio Bellas Artes' was completed in the record time of five months and opened to the public with an inaugural function held on September 12, 1914.

From the beginning, the property was designed and used as a movie theatre. This is certified in the explanatory report attached to the construction report and the work plan section, which contains detailed representation of the projection booth. No stage was proposed initially, as a flat screen was enough for its use as a cinema. However, a small orchestra pit was included, since it is well-known that "silent films" were accompanied by various sound effects and live music. Currently, the "Palacio Bellas Artes" remains closed to the public and is used by the owner as a simple warehouse for material storage.

### **Current status**

After being closed for 25 years, the condition of this hundred-year-old building continues to deteriorate. In January 2014, the building was wrapped externally with a mesh as a precautionary measure to keep debris from falling on to the street. The Department of Planning of the city is currently reviewing the existing condition of the building, to determine exactly what the current state of conservation is.

### **Letters of support, press articles, etc**

A significant cast of intellectuals and professionals related to the world of culture have wanted to show their appreciation of this building, citing the need to bequeath it to future generations. There are 151 qualified voices that support this position, which include 23 architects and 15 art historians, as well as artists, writers,

musicians, publishers, etc. It includes such diverse personalities as Ramón Saizarbitoria, Fernando Aramburu, Anjel Lertxundi, José Antonio Sistiaga, Borja Cobeaga, Carlos Aurtenetxe, Jorge G. Aranguren, Álvaro Bermejo, Marta Casares, Luisa Etxenike, Clara Gangutia, Vicente Larrea, Juan Antonio Urbeltz, Frantxis Lopez de Landatxe, or José Ignacio Linazasoro. The filmmaker Victor Erice showed his support “as many citizens’ initiatives are in place to prevent such nonsense”. The philosopher Fernando Savater expressed his rejection of the demolition of the cinema “for its historical, urban and cultural interest”. The painter Jesús Mari Lazkano stressed that “it is a building that I love(...)I hope they won’t make it become one more on the missing list, a list already too long in our country”.

### **Recommended actions**

- Communicate by letter to the Basque Government and the City of San Sebastián that the International Heritage Alert of the ‘Palacio Bellas Artes’ has been completed and will be issued.
- Communicate it to the media through a press conference.
- Our actions should be aimed at presenting a letter to the authorities that reminds them of their obligation to protect and restore this 20th century monument, which had the maximum protection of the State as BIC until it was recently removed. It is urgent that the dome, its most character-defining feature, be reconstructed to regain its cultural and architectural significance.

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