Bernard Rudofsky (Moravia, 1905 – New York, 1988) was an architect and designer whose significance is probably due less to his practice than to his critical and theoretical work, and to the efficient communication of his discourse, which always made great use of the visual to transmit his ideas. We might say that the core of his thought, his ‘kemotiv’, was the revision of so-called progress in the contemporary world and the consumer society. Regarding the media he used to publish his ideas on the subject, we should emphasize that, apart from very skillful use of exhibitions. In all, his influence was that of a venerated author whose thought has become increasingly assimilated until it has now become part of our common heritage. This means that his figure is even more relevant today, even though he continues to be largely unknown to the general public. To date there has been no monographic study of Rudofsky in Spain, and now the José Guerrero Centre has stopped up to fill the gap as part of its course of action in spreading awareness of the work of important figures in contemporary culture that are still unknown in Spain.

The project of which our exhibition is part started out in 2012 with the organization of a monographic international seminar in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport. Coinciding with the International Architecture Week, from 7th to 9th October 2013, the seminar brought together a numerous group of specialists in the work of Rudofsky. Rather than providing a linear or chronological overview of Rudofsky’s work, the researchers reviewed its critical framework and his role in vernacular architecture from the viewpoints of anthropology, architecture and photography, and they discussed his presence in the architectural panorama of Italy, Brazil and the Spanish Mediterranean. The book the reader is now holding brings together the contributions to this seminar, with the addition of some complementary texts and a selection of the work on show.

True to the spirit of the author, the exhibition presents his sophisticated, sensual legacy and the originality of his biting criticism. Following Rudofsky’s own proposals, it builds up a discourse which, while not ignoring historical accuracy, places visual logic before chronological or geographical sense. The exhibition proposes a stratified analysis of some “new ways of living” using a selection of often unpublished photographs, designs, drawings, publications and projects from a number of collections. It also reveals his intense, many-sided production touching on spheres such as clothes and footwear design, historical criticism and architectural projects, culminating in a monographic study of La Casa in Frigiliana – his house-cum-studio in Andalusia and his last building. This synthetic project of which our exhibition is part started out in 2012 with the organization of a monographic international seminar in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport. Coinciding with the International Architecture Week, from 7th to 9th October 2013, the seminar brought together a numerous group of specialists in the work of Rudofsky. Rather than providing a linear or chronological overview of Rudofsky’s work, the researchers reviewed its critical framework and his role in vernacular architecture from the viewpoints of anthropology, architecture and photography, and they discussed his presence in the architectural panorama of Italy, Brazil and the Spanish Mediterranean. The book the reader is now holding brings together the contributions to this seminar, with the addition of some complementary texts and a selection of the work on show.

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manifesto of contemporary habitation was declared a monument in 1948. Despite this recognition, it has undergone a profound transformation affecting the values that made it unique. The ultimate goal of this exhibition is to denounce this aggression against our heritage and to learn to appreciate our so-called minor architecture, such as this simple house in a Mediterranean setting.

Layer 1: Rudofsky’s universe. Towards an unpackaged body

On its first layer, the exhibition reveals the interdisciplinary nature of Rudofsky’s career, from the start of his professional activity in the thirties. His interest in the contemporary culture of the body represents a permanent denunciation of the stigmas undergone by our sensuality as a result of social prejudices and the dictates of fashion. It is significant that the exhibit: Are Clothes Modern? (Museum of Modern Art, New York, November 1944 – March 1945) was the first by this thinker trained as an architect. His preparatory gouaches and the Body Idols made for the exhibition by Costantino Nivola surprise us with bodies deformed by fashion, trapped in a corset or standing on impossibly high heels, victims of the stringency of social norms. After the Second World War and with the American Dream in full flight, Rudofsky called people’s attention to the futility of the “modern man’s suit”, the uselessness of buttons, and the unnaturalness of its pockets and parts. By putting images of modern industrial culture side by side with others considered primitive, he confronts us with their similarity and dismantles the traditional categorization of opposites. In contrast, the designs by Irene Schawinsky or Claire McCorrdell free the body, and show a woman with loose garments and simple shapes. Rudofsky proposed his own geometry also found in his architectural work. A little later, in 1956, he designed the exhibition in which he decontextualized the materials, freeing them from their customary usage and offering a sculptural dimension of their own in the landscape. In the sixties, with José Guerrero he discovered the Mediterranean, the dream houses he designed for the exhibition by Costantino Nivola (1951), which were very cheaply produced, versatile dresses that minimized storage space. The first clothes he designed in the thirties for his wife Berta and close friends were loose, simple garments with minimal seams and no buttons or pockets. In the sixties, the Unfashionable Human Body brought together several of his texts on the subject and reproduced illustrations of works by Christo, as well as Torsos or Female Empires (1950), symbolizing his general criticism of the control that contemporary society exercised on people’s bodies.

In 1945, Rudofsky was contracted to design textiles for Schiffer Prints, a company for whom Salvador Dalí and Ray and Charles Eames also worked. The exhibition shows several of his original fabrics and one of the preparatory drawings. His Italian period, therefore, was marked by his collaborations with Luigi Cosenza and Gio Ponti. In 1935 he designed a house on the island of Procida (Naples) for his wife Berta. Its intimate compactness developed around a central patio caused suspicion among the authorities, who vetoed its construction. “What we need is not a new way of building, but a new way of living,” Rudofsky stated in 1938 in an article dedicated to this unbuilt building. In 1937, Luigi Cosenza and he designed a house in Postano (Italy) that was never built either, although his photomontages of the time allow us to imagine it. His Italian period, therefore, was marked by projects that enquired into an architectural modernity filtered through the legacy of the Mediterranean.

Few of Rudofsky’s houses were ever built, but his scant production, widely scattered between Italy, Brazil, USA and Spain. While studying at the Vienna Technische Hochschule (1922-1928) he travelled through Germany, Bulgaria, Turkey, Switzerland, France and Italy, thus rooting his architectural work in the architectural tradition of the direct experience of place. The Casa Oro, which he built together with Luigi Cosenza in Naples (1935-1937), was his first completed project and today represents the only example of his architectural legacy preserved in Europe, with the exception of this house in Frigiliana. Brazil is the country where most of Rudofsky’s completed architecture is found. The exhibition shows illustrations of the Fronter and Amagansett houses, both built in the late 1930s in São Paulo, after Rudofsky left Europe in 1938 when Hitler annexed Austria. Shortly after arriving in America, Philip Goodwin included his work in the ‘1945 exhibition at the MoMA and later the book, Brazil Builds: Architecture New and Old 1652-1942. The Holstein house in Itapetim is the other of his completed houses in Brazil. In the USA, he built the garden-house designed with Nicols for the artist himself in Amagansett, New York (1949-1950) and an extension of James H. Carmel’s house in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan (1962-1964).

La Casa, 1969-1971

Rudofsky’s encounter with Spain took place in the sixties, when he began to visit regularly and to take an interest in astute Spanish vernacular architecture. Through his friendship with the Guinot family, he discovered the Mediterranean landscape of Frigiliana, where in the seventies he decided to build his summer house-cum-studio among the hills some three kilometres from Nerja (Malaga). Built according to a design by Rudofsky – although his friend José Antonio Coderch signed the project for legal reasons – La Casa has been defined as living at one and the same time sensual and Spartan, it makes a claim for the values of traditional architecture and the economy of the local; a simple architecture of volumes and patios, with strong links to the landscape in its setting, based on the respect for the place as opposed to the transforming aspirations of designing architecture. The project of La Casa appears in the framework of his proposal and integral criticism of contemporary domestic space. The value of empty space as opposed to the accumulation of useless objects, the liberty of the bathroom, the liberation of the body in the intimacy of the house, and the joy of austere, sensual living make this house the tangible representation of the author’s thought. The study of the terrain and the identification of its values – the landscape, contours, trees and former agricultural terracing – are shown here by the preliminary research on the site and Rudofsky’s own plans and photos. There is also a scale model built as part of a research project on La Casa for clearer understanding.

Despite its having been declared an Asset of Cultural Interest, the house has recently undergone profound alterations, affecting the values that made it unique. Through this exhibition and its accompanying catalogue is to denounce this attack on our most fragile heritage and to learn to appreciate our so-called minor architectures, such as this house, half-way between two towns, where José Guerrero and his family came every summer.