

Overnight at the Crossroads: Abelardo Lafuente's Architectural Legacy for 'The Hong Kong and Shanghai Hotels Ltd.' in Shanghai

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ABSTRACT The business success of the most important hotel company in Asia in the 20th century, and therefore of its owners, the Kadoorie Family, is intertwined with the life of the only Spanish architect in the city of Huangpu. A long-forgotten story, its discovery reveals the interests, tastes and cultural mix of the multinational community that inhabited the most open city of the continent. Abelardo Lafuente García-Rojo (Madrid 1871–Shanghai 1931) worked uninterruptedly for the 'Hong Kong and Shanghai Hotels Ltd.' (HSH) for ten years since 1916. In that decade, he carried out interior renovations in eight HSH hotels in the cities of Shanghai, Hong Kong and Shameen in Canton. Along with that, he worked for many clients and introduced the Spanish neo-Arab style in several buildings which still stand today in the city under unknown authorship. His professional career in China—linked to the HSH—is a case study of the cultural melting pot of the city of Shanghai. Lafuente is nowadays a foot note in Shanghai's architecture history and yet he deserves a chapter of his own, and this article is the first step.

KEYWORDS Abelardo Lafuente, Spanish architects in China, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Shanghai Hotels, ballrooms

Received June 23, 2019; accepted September 4, 2019.

This article traces the connections between Asia's foremost hotel chain and the professional trajectory of Abelardo Lafuente García-Rojo (Madrid, 1871–Shanghai, 1931), the only officially registered Spanish architect among Shanghai's construction professionals. In the 1910s and 1920s, Lafuente designed many of the most sophisticated and influential sites in Asia's most cosmopolitan city, including spectacular ballrooms for some of the hotels of 'The Hong Kong and Shanghai Hotels Limited' (HSH).

Lafuente was a self-taught architect, and to date, there is no documentary proof of his university studies in either Madrid or Manila¹. His extensive non-formal training and experience in construction was tied to his father's career as Manila's interim municipal architect and continued until his father's death in 1900. Subsequently, he worked in the construction field in Manila for 13 years. There is no clear evidence that Lafuente was influenced by the European Beaux Art tradition. Rather, his unique architectural designs are reminiscent of the eclectic and historicist style of 19th-century Spain. The question of how he succeeded in capturing the attention of the heterodox Jewish community, which was the wealthiest class in Shanghai, as well

as the city's sparse Spanish community with his unorthodox style is an intriguing one. The answer to this question would yield insights regarding an exceptional architect with a unique career trajectory. Lafuente is particularly remarkable given his origins in Spain, a nation that was evidently retreating from the global stage at the beginning of the 20th century.

Previously a great power, Spain was experiencing a rapid decline after losing its Asian territories (the Philippines and Guam) and suffering humiliating defeats in the Caribbean (Cuba and Puerto Rico). Primarily based in Manila in the Philippines, Asia's once flourishing Spanish community, whose businesses had for centuries prospered, now faced an agonizing process of disintegration and relocation outside of Luzon, mostly back to Europe. However, a few adventurous and decidedly foolhardy entrepreneurs decided to try their luck in another Asian location. Of all the ports located along the Chinese coast that were accessible to foreigners, the one that they found the most appealing was the booming city Shanghai. The business elite and representatives of the Spanish religious orders arrived in this city together, introducing a pragmatic twist that conjoined

secular interests with those of converting China's mainland to Christianity. Both groups perceived Shanghai as a gateway into China. Spain was included among the foreign powers granted extraterritorial rights under the Treaty of Nanjing. This treaty provided many liberties and benefits to citizens of these countries, as reflected in the inclusion of their national flags among those forming the shield of the first flag of the 'Shanghai Municipality'². Among the Spaniards who settled in the city were those who knew how to capitalize on the arrival of the new century and what it offered, namely modernity, entertainment, and enjoyment for the foreigners and adventurers who settled on the banks of the Huangpu River over the next two decades of an intriguing phase in Shanghai's history.

Between 1910 and 1926, these Spanish entrepreneurs developed three of the many ventures that were being initiated in a city that was both dynamic and cosmopolitan. The first focused on Shanghai's film industry, which originated in Europe and was firmly under the control of Antonio Ramos (Toro Escudero 2012, 104). Ramos managed up to seven movie theaters in addition to producing his own films with actors from the city. The second venture centred on new means of transportation in Shanghai, such as rickshaws and American-made automobiles that were run by Albert Cohen, a Spanish Sephardic Jew who owned more than 60 percent of the transportation businesses and parking garages in the city (Morton-Cameron and Feldwick 1917, 427). The last venture entailed the production of cigars, a product that reflected a lifestyle that was in vogue in Shanghai. Given their monopoly in Manila, Spanish companies produced cigars locally. Thus, Shanghai was characterized by sophistication and extravagance that could be enjoyed on a daily basis at the key sites of modern mass entertainment. The city's prosperity attracted a steady stream of people from all over the world, whose various business ventures boomed. Given their steady growth over the following two decades, the three Spanish business empires and the Spanish Christian missions in Shanghai required an architect to design their buildings. This individual was Abelardo Lafuente, the only Spanish architect in Shanghai at the time.

Jews from different parts of the world, apart from England, France, and the United States, the three predominant foreign powers, constituted the most heterodox and affluent community in the city. This community also needed a designer for their buildings. Thanks to the architectural requirements of each of these influential social groups, Lafuente's professional career was launched under unusual circumstances. As a result of his being in the right place

at the right time, and far from any national stylistic influence, Lafuente's work was of incalculable value. He built his first two buildings—a movie theater and a garage—for the above-mentioned Spanish entrepreneurs³ on Bubbling Well Road, which was considered one of Shanghai's most prominent streets. Henceforth, Lafuente was chosen by members of the Jewish community, mainly instigated by Albert Cohen, as the architect responsible for their most important building projects in Shanghai. Thus, the most influential members of the Jewish community in Shanghai assigned the task of designing the interiors of the top hotels, their first 'country club', and some of their private mansions to the city's only Spanish architect⁴. These buildings remain striking, albeit in a fragile and poorly maintained state. While it is impossible to cover them all in this article, they provide proof of Lafuente's enduring influence.

In this article, I will examine the influence of Lafuente's work in Shanghai, his formal heterodoxy, as well as his creativity, which differentiated him from the homogeneous architectural works of the architects from the three great powers during the first two decades of the 20th century. The neoclassical building projects of the British architects, which were designed according to academic conventions, being repetitive, compositionally regulated, and with the stylistic heaviness of British colonialism, were mainly located along the Bund, the city's prestigious waterfront, in addition to being scattered across the city.

This standardized and academically oriented style remained dominant until well into the interwar period in Europe. Shanghai came under its formal influence somewhat later thanks to the influence of American architects who were educated in Europe, or that of Europeans who for political or social reasons left the 'Old World' to seek a better life in Asia at the end of the 1920s. The producers of the most creative work that was not corseted into this academic mold would eventually prevail. This shift that forever changed the architectural dynamics of Shanghai can be traced precisely to the period between 1925 and 1926. For his part, Lafuente found inspiration in the more modern architectural influences emanating from the West Coast of the United States. He decided to retain his Shanghai office with his Russian partner, Alexander Yaron, while opening a second office in Los Angeles, made possible as a result of his international acclaim as the architect who designed renowned ballrooms and movie theatres in Shanghai. Yaron was a Russian architect who had emigrated from his homeland to Shanghai along with many other Russians for political reasons. He started out as Lafuente's employee and ended up becoming his partner. This contractual

relationship ended in mid-1928 in a bitter and sudden manner when Yaron and his son stole the studio's influential Chinese clients for their own professional pursuits.

This account, however, begins with Lafuente's arrival in Shanghai in 1913, where he was welcomed by members of the Spanish business and religious communities who were now settled there and with whom he had previously developed friendships while living in Manila. His first projects involving the design of movie theatres and garages on Bubbling Well Road, and especially the headquarters of Albert Cohen's Star Garage Company (completed in 1915), which is now 722, West Nanjing Road, opened the doors for Lafuente to the Jewish community. A notable figure within this community was Elly Kadoorie, a Jewish businessman of Iraqi ancestry, whose family was well established in Mumbai, India, in the 1800s. After marrying Laura Mocatta, a Jewish woman with Spanish roots, Kadoorie decided to try his luck, with his brother, in Hong Kong and Shanghai (HK_Heritage 2017). They set up several companies that were remarkably successful. This entrepreneurship led to the founding in the mid-1920s of what was to become the leading hotel company in Asia, 'The Hong Kong and Shanghai Hotels Limited' (HSH).

The success of this company was intimately linked to the financial status of the Kadoorie family, whose real estate holdings would eventually encompass a chain of hotels located in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Beijing, and Shameen in Canton (Hibbard 2010). Against all odds, Abelardo Lafuente worked with this company for an uninterrupted period from 1916 to 1926. His architectural designs had a formative stylistic influence on most of their properties, especially their interiors. The Kadoorie family's choice of such a heterodox architect for designing their hotels' interiors can be attributed to their multicultural origins and the stylistic influences that appealed to them. The buildings themselves were in complete conformity to British academic conventions and the European Beaux Arts tradition. However, in Shanghai, a truly global city where people from the Middle East, America, and Asia converged and crossed paths, the choice of an academic style convention for the interior designs of the buildings would not have evoked the international ambience that such hotels were intended to convey. Lafuente's ability to combine and integrate different styles skillfully into one style, without being extravagant, was integral for effectively designing sitting rooms, restaurant halls, and ballrooms for people of diverse cultures and origins.

It is not coincidental that Lafuente's brief three-year partnership with the American architect, G. O. Wootten, in

Shanghai overlapped with the period when he commenced working with HSH and the Jewish community in Shanghai. The fact that the studio had an American at its helm during its early years undoubtedly enabled it to secure new orders. Ten years later, Lafuente was forced to end his collaboration with the hotel company for reasons beyond his control. At this time, he wrote a letter to the editor of *La Nación* in Madrid in which he explained that despite having worked for the largest hotel company in Asia for a decade, his greatest work and paradoxically his last, the Majestic Hotel, put an abrupt end to his career. The nationalist influence meant that commencing from 1924, the company only hired British or American professionals.

Consequently, during the years that Lafuente worked for HSH, he was never able to build new premises, which would explain his professional trajectory, first in Shanghai and subsequently throughout Asia. Instead, as I will show, he designed building interiors for HSH in three of the most influential metropolises in the region. He enjoyed great fame within the international community, to the extent that upon his departure for the United States from Shanghai, eleven years after his professional relationship with HSH began, he was profiled in the illustrated section of *China Press* as 'a builder of buildings' (see Andrew Field's article in the same issue and Figure 1 depicting a photograph published in this newspaper).

The Lafuente and Wootten Projects Developed for HSH.

Lafuente & Wootten Architects was founded in early 1916, establishing a studio located in the Union Building, No. 4, The Bund. The partners began to have recognition in March 1917 after winning a bid for the construction of the new premises of the American Consulate in Shanghai (*La Tribuna*, March 27, 1917). However, this complex, the plan of which included a consulate, a court of justice, a post office, and a detention centre, was never constructed because of a lack of funding. Had this project been implemented, the professional careers of both architects would have been dramatically different. The design of such an important public building, strategically located beside the Huangpu River between the Russian, Japanese, and German consulates, would have made them celebrities. However, they would have probably employed a much more orthodox style for this project.

Within this partnership, the stylistic influence of Lafuente's American partner on his work was tangential, given that their firm only survived for three and a half years. A family house designed by Lafuente & Wootten



Figure 1 Self-portrait of Abelardo Lafuente (Source: the illustrated section of *China Press*, April 10, 1927).

Figure 2 A photo of the interior of the Palace Hotel (Source: Abelardo Lafuente's Personal Portfolio from Lafuente Family Private Archive, cited in Leonardo Pérez 2019).

Architects clearly draws on the style of Frank Lloyd Wright (Morton-Cameron and Feldwick 1917, 360). However, Wright's imprint in Lafuente's work is only perceptible in details such as the novel inclusion of floral and pre-Art Deco elements in his early projects for HSH. His own predominantly eclectic-historicist style is clearly reflected in his first small assignment, entailing the re-designing of the ground floor of the Palace Hotel located along the banks of the Bund.

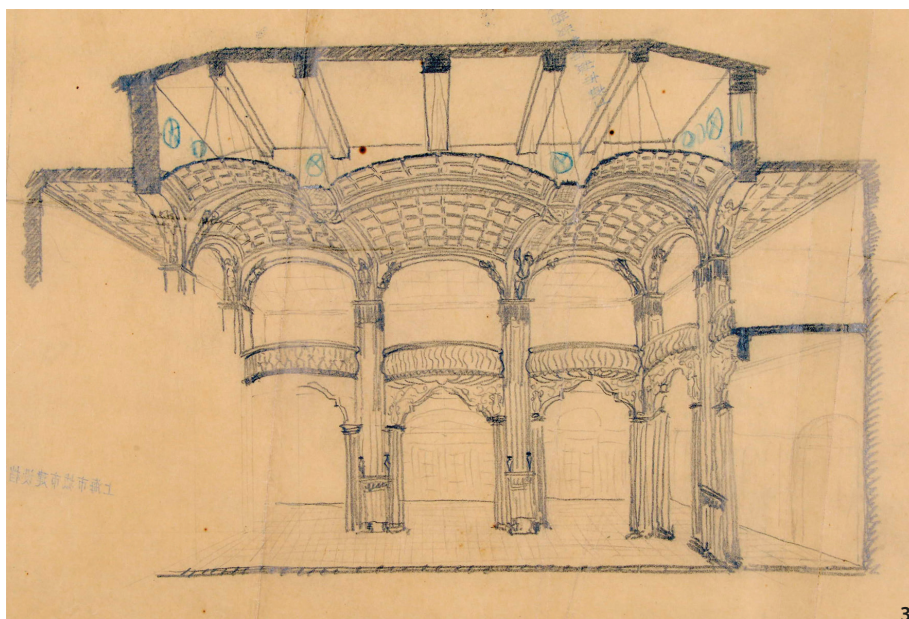
This first assignment, albeit limited in scope, was highly symbolic, as the Palace Hotel was one of the two flagship hotels of the still Shanghainese HSH company. Although not as important as the American consulate project, the project site on the ground floor of the hotel, where the windows directly faced the Bund and the famous East Nanjing Road, was strategic. The project was probably intended to transform the Tea Room and the Grill Room that were located along the central corridor into a room more suited for contemporary uses. In addition to using standing and ceiling lamps, Lafuente employed decorative elements emitting direct and indirect lighting that were strategically located in the corners of the plaster moldings. The decorative Beaux Art elements in the form of paintings of Greek goddesses in the shaft as well as the Corinthian-style motifs adorning each capital and also the beams were conspicuous in the main pilasters. The inclusion of Solomonic columns in the singular niche provides a good example of the formal orthodoxy contributed by Lafuente's American partner in these early projects (Figure 2).

In July 1917, a project to remodel the interior of the Hotel House Astor was sanctioned⁵. The most striking feature of this project entailed the area under the courtyard, which at the time was still covered by a unidirectional

structure of wooden beams from which glass barrel vaults hung, giving the ballroom its extravagant upper form. Notably, the architects who designed the building were Davies & Thomas Architects, an English firm. At the end of 1917, the Astor House Hotel was granted a license to open a new ballroom, which was acknowledged in the press. On December 1, 1917, the *North China Herald* published an article titled 'New Ballroom at the Astor House' describing its redesign, which is partially reproduced in this special issue (Field 2019). This ballroom is the only surviving one of its kind that remains as close to the original design as possible. However, since 2018, this historic building in Shanghai ceased to function as a hotel. In an article published in the *North China Herald*, all of the professionals involved in the project were credited: 'The architectural work was carried out by Messrs. Lafuente and Wootten, the furnishings by Messrs. Lane, Crawford & Co., and the electric lighting by Messrs. Andersen, Meyer & Co.' According to the article, the room's stunning décor attracted a great deal of attention among the city's residents. This description can also be contrasted with the original drawing found in the Urban Construction Archives of Shanghai (Leonardo Pérez 2019, 339) (Figure 3).

Following this celebrated project, Lafuente and Wootten were commissioned to carry out other projects that feature significantly in the history of Shanghai such as the original American Club, two further garages constructed for Cohen, and a single-family house with a clear Usonian influence that were described in *The Globe Encyclopedia*. The acclaim won by these projects encouraged the Spanish-American studio to enter a 1920 design competition relating to the Legislative Building of the Senate and Congress in Manila.

Figure 3 A section of the Astor House Hotel ballroom, in an original handmade sketch by Lafuente (Source: the Urban Construction Archives of Shanghai).



Shanghai's Jewish Club

Let us, however, return to Shanghai. Following the successful ballroom project, and as a result of his good relations with the Jewish community facilitated by Kadoorie and Cohen, Lafuente was ready to embark on the Jewish Country Club of Shanghai project in 1918. This project would turn out to be one of the most important ones that propelled the first part of Abelardo Lafuente's professional trajectory.

An article titled 'A Jewish Club for Shanghai' published in the *North China Herald* (July 6, 1918) provided a description of the plot that had been acquired for this project along with the features of the one-story building, which was to have a large auditorium as well as several well-furnished rooms. The article portrayed the excitement of the Jewish community at the prospect of having such a meeting place while also emphasizing the sobriety of the building in keeping with the humble origins of most of its members. This portrayal is at odds with another description of the same building offered by a Spanish journalist (Romero Salas 1921). In a personal letter that was included in his book *Spain in China: Chronicle of a Journey* (1921), Romero Salas exuberantly described the Jewish Club as the most admirable and complete work of Abelardo Lafuente in China to date, with its spacious galleries and lavish auditorium. What struck him most was the immense gallery of unsurpassed beauty on the ground floor, which opened out on to the lovely garden. This building still exists and is located at West Nanjing Road, 1799. It showcases a historicist-academic and neo-classical

exterior, reflecting the influence of Spanish architecture of the large summer palaces of Madrid's upper classes of the 19th century, the formal similarities of which can still be observed today (Leonardo Pérez 2019, 351). However, the building was never formally inaugurated. A few years after its completion at a time when Lafuente was immersed in his work for HSH, Elly Kadoorie purchased the building for himself and had it renovated as his own mansion located on the outskirts of the city by Graham Brown & Wingrove, a British studio (Figure 4).

The dissolution of Lafuente & Wootten Architects for undisclosed reasons on July 31, 1919 was reported in the *Shanghai Times*. Lafuente continued to work solo from his studio in Shanghai, 'Abelardo Lafuente Garcia-Rojo Architect', from 1919 to 1924 and remained associated with the HSH company. It was during this stage when he was free from the constraints of academic conventions that he was most prolific, developing the most interesting works of his career. During this exceptional five-year period, Lafuente attained architectural maturity while retaining his creativity and formal heterodoxy. Consequently, he was able to design extraordinary buildings that served as visual icons for successive generations in Shanghai. His unique architecture, devoid of the influence of any universal dogma and without major modifications, remains standing in the city. Despite the singularity of its style, Lafuente's architecture effectively blends into the surrounding environment. A century after their construction, these buildings have become so well integrated into the streets and neighbourhoods where they are located that it is impossible for the untrained eye to recognize



Figure 4 View of the Shanghai Jewish Club and Mr. Kadoorie's mansion (Source: The Hong Kong Heritage Project, 2011).

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the imprint of a Spanish architect, rendering them all the more interesting as a topic of study.

During the five-year period when Lafuente worked on his own, he implemented his best projects for his regular Spanish clientele, such as Antonio Ramos, Albert Cohen, the Augustinian Corporation, the Spanish Recollects Procuration, and religious missions of the Dominican Order. This built heritage, which is so well camouflaged in the city, and of largely unknown authorship, includes the summer mansion of Antonio Ramos. The mansion is a masterpiece embodying the heterodox Spanish neo-Arabic style that was introduced into China by Lafuente. It is located at one of the prized corners of what is now Hongkou District, which is the area where the city's tycoons have built their summer residences. Lafuente's unique style served as his insignia for future clients, regardless of their nationalities. Whereas only Spanish clients were interested in this style, there was growing interest in an evolving oriental style among wealthy Europeans. Some of these individuals even made their way to Granada to visit the Alhambra Palace, the masterpiece of Arabic architecture in Spain. Consequently, in 1915, Lafuente embarked on his first commissioned project in the neo-Arabic style; a private residence designed for an unknown client. This building, with a reinforced concrete framing, was developed in the north-eastern section of the city on Ward Road, which was the longest street within the area of the American settlement. He also applied this opulent and unusual neo-Arabic style when designing the interior of the Olympic Theatre for Antonio Ramos in 1914 (later renamed as the Embassy Theatre). Ramos, who was originally from Granada, bought

a large plot located at the end corner of North Szechuan Road, where it intersected with Darroch Road. He then hired Lafuente to build a neo-Arabic style villa for him (Leonardo Pérez 2019, 379). The house was intended to be the family summer residence. Following Spanish customs, it was sited on the outskirts of the city to provide a respite from the sweltering heat of Shanghai. The large plot was divided into two plots, and a four-story apartment block, named Ramos Apartments, was constructed next to the villa. Its design was a relatively common international style, but the building remains standing, representing an iconic site within this neighbourhood.

Among Lafuente's less well-known projects are the Rosenfeld family mansion, located in the heart of what is now Xuhui District, which was the largest house of procurement of a Spanish religious order located west of the current Huangpu District, and two large semi-detached houses designed for Albert Cohen. The latter houses are located on both sides of the main arterial road connecting the above-mentioned districts. Properties located along this road are among the most expensive in contemporary Shanghai. These projects demonstrate Lafuente's distinctive contribution to the development of Shanghai during this period⁶. They constitute singular elements on the urban landscape that are in sharp contrast with the built heritage designed by other foreign architects outside of the city's iconic locations. Given their adherence to academic conventions and dogmatism, their scale, and their incongruity with their surroundings, the latter buildings have disappeared over time in a place that did not always want to preserve its colonial past.



Figure 5, Figure 6 Views of the Astor House Hotel ballroom, photo taken in 1923 (Source: Abelardo Lafuente's Personal Portfolio from Lafuente Family Private Archive, cited in Leonardo Pérez 2019).

Lafuente's Best Years with HSH: 1923 and 1924.

The year that clearly stands out as being Lafuente's most productive year is 1923, when Lafuente was recruited to implement two projects in Shanghai along with many others in Hong Kong. The first of these commissioned projects was the modeling of the interior of the ballroom at the Astor House Hotel, on which Lafuente had previously worked six years earlier with his American partner. This kind of work was widespread in a city whose residents were hungry for state-of-the-art novelties and extravagance; more so in the case of a site that was one of the top entertainment venues in the city. The second project that had an undeniably formative influence on Lafuente's career in Shanghai was the newly renovated Majestic Hotel.

In December 1923, when the Astor House Hotel's ballroom, remodeled by Lafuente, was reopened, it shook the city's architectural foundations. The innovations introduced in the floor and the ceiling of the ballroom were so remarkable that they attracted profuse and unanimous praise from the press, as illustrated by articles such as 'New Astor House Ball Room' (*North China Herald*, December 29, 1923; see also Field's article in this issue). Journalists as well as clients were stunned by Lafuente's creativity, which was a mere prelude to his masterpiece located on Gordon Road that was inaugurated eleven months later.

The current state of this site that awed professionals and laypersons at the time of the project's completion, and continues to do so, reflects a glaring lapse in the preservation of heritage building interiors in the city

of Shanghai. It is very difficult to separate the parts of the project that were implemented in 1917 by Lafuente with his American partner and those executed in 1923 during the second remodeling phase. Therefore, the ballroom should be considered as a two-phase project implemented by both architects. The original photographs relating to this project, taken in 1923, were sourced from Lafuente's personal portfolio (Leonardo Pérez 2019, 367) (Figures 5, Figure 6). These images reveal Lafuente's creativity in including novel floral motifs that were the prelude to the use of Art Deco for the first time in Shanghai. The design's freedom from academic dogma was evident not only in the upper part of the structure that will be explored later but also in the polylobulated intermediate arches that displayed a profusion of motifs derived from Orientalism that prevailed in Europe at this time in complete contrast to those derived from academic geometry. Finally, as if the formal innovations introduced at the upper and intermediate levels were not impressive enough, the lower level showcased a wooden floor distinguished by its curved disposition. This floor perfectly complemented the extravagant rhythms of the best jazz bands playing in the city at the time and continues to attract attention.

The usual composition of opaque semi-spherical domes in the ceiling was transformed into glass barrel vaults decorated with abundant floral motifs. In addition, Lafuente transformed the old wooden deck of the hotel's central courtyard into a glass deck that evoked a corner of the Paxton Pavilion in London. Its remarkable luminous effect during the day as well as at night by means of

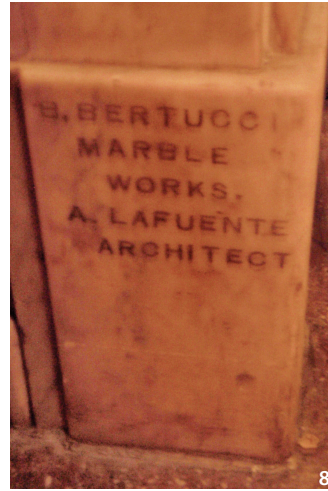


Figure 7 A photograph of the Astor House Hotel ballroom, taken in 2011 (Source: Noel Arraiz).

Figure 8 Column lower detail at the Astor House Hotel ballroom taken in 2011 (Source: the author).

an artificial lighting system delighted a whole generation of guests who when dancing under the floral dome felt as if they were dancing under the light of the full moon. This feeling of airiness was perfectly complemented by the curved wooden floor that gave the impression of waves. The remarkably long wooden planks were arranged so as to dazzle the hundreds of dancers eager to experience what was truly the first multisensory experience induced by these design features.

The Contemporary Astor House Ballroom as Paradigmatic of the Conservation of Shanghai's Architectural Heritage

Though many other ballrooms surfaced in various parts of Shanghai in the 1920s, as Andrew Field (2019) points out, two of the most important ones pertained to HSH hotels and were the work of Abelardo Lafuente. Of the few remaining ballrooms in the city, the Astor House ballroom remains distinctive and is the only one designed by the Spanish architect. It is also the only one 'signed in marble' by Lafuente and preserved with some originality (Figure 7, Figure 8).

A detailed analysis of the original photographs described above alongside current photographs (taken in 2011) reveals that the preservation work was very superficial and performed with little historically informed rigor. There are two ways of conducting preservation and restoration work. The first approach applies when the original elements are absent or in poor condition. Under these circumstances, the original project can be reproduced on the basis of a thorough and detailed study of the first-hand documentation. The second approach can be adopted if the original elements are well preserved. In this case,

the aim is to showcase those original elements through a neutral architecture that does not conflict visually with them, enabling the beauty of the primary details to shine through while the modern elements simply serve as a constructive vehicle for conveying what is truly important.

In the case of the Astor House ballroom, neither of these two paths was followed. Instead, a flawed course of action was chosen that does not dignify and reveal the value of this space to its full extent. The restoration effort entailed the use of poor quality materials, seeking to imitate the more visual formal elements that had not been preserved, such as the striking glass ceiling composed of nine glass sail vaults. The decorative form bears no connection to and has much less presence than the original décor, diminishing the opulence of the room. The inclusion of large lamps hanging from the ceiling destroys the sensations of lightness and transparency that once characterized the room. The replacement of the engraved arches under the balconies of the upper gallery by three-centred arches simplifies the transitions between decorative elements, obscuring the lavish ornamentation. In particular, as Field (2019) notes in his article, the majesty of the formal and aesthetic transition of 'the stage for the orchestra and the orchestra shell designed in the shape of a peacock's fan' is completely and permanently lost as its form and materials have been removed. Fortunately, the marble columns and the lamps carved in the same material have been preserved. Therefore, compared with other elements, the vertical elements are endowed with greater presence, although they now co-exist with the air conditioning installation that is required but far too visible within the restoration project.

Serendipitously, the most creatively outstanding element of the room, although barely visible because of the current arrangement of the furniture, has remained

unchanged to this day. I speak of the flooring of the ballroom⁷. This was the novelty introduced by Lafuente in Shanghai, who installed numerous wooden planks perpendicular to the floor. Arranging the wood in this way was a painstaking task, as the nails had to be precisely placed to acquire the desired form. This allowed Lafuente to create a stunning visual effect on the dance floor that fascinated guests and was reported in the newspapers.

Lamentably, the restoration work in Shanghai has been carried out very poorly, and much remains to be done in this regard. Historic heritage of this kind should be fully protected by the authorities. However, simplistic reinterpretations of Western designs usually lose all of the value from the original elements, although some vestiges of the past may be retained. This issue may arise because of a lack of training in restoration work, because the intention behind the design of certain details is unknown, or because the original documentation has not been consulted. Addressing these issues is crucial for the well-executed restoration of an historical site. Therefore, if there is a true commitment to the restoration of architectural heritage in China, the first steps must be to collect the primary documentation and to place the project in professional hands.

The HSH's Flagship Project: the Majestic Hotel

In 1924, Lafuente was immersed, day and night, in a project to convert the MacBain family mansion into the Majestic Hotel located between Beijing Road and Bubbling Well Road, on a plot on the eastern side of Gordon Road. It was the first time that he had been placed in charge of the renovation of an entire building for the hotel company. Because of the heavy workload entailed, Lafuente hired Alexander Yaron, a Russian architect, who had arrived in Shanghai a couple of years earlier. Under Lafuente's direction, Yaron was given responsibility for working on a section of the Majestic Hotel's interiors.

On November 1, 1924, the New Majestic Hotel in Shanghai was inaugurated, marking the culmination of Lafuente's last year as an architect with his own studio (Leonardo Pérez 2019, 395). This event was lauded in the local press. On that day, a detailed article titled 'The New Majestic Hotel. Shanghai's palace of pleasure, with its gorgeous interiors and furnishings and a ballroom with a spring floor, will open today', appeared in the *North China Herald* and the *Supreme Court & Consular Gazette*. The article, which chronicled Lafuente's pinnacular work, has also been partially reproduced by Andrew Field (2019) in his article for this special issue.

In the original photos provided in this article (Figures 9–11), it is evident that the style of the hotel's interior was eclectic, which was characteristic of that era, based on neoclassical historicism with numerous references to ancient Rome and Greece. Italian marble featured prominently in the main lobby. Despite the variegated composition of the marble, encompassing up to seventeen different colours, a balance of shapes and shadows was achieved. One of the hotel's main dining rooms featured 22 golden columns that hid the radiators of the new steam heating system. Here too, there was an abundance of floral ornaments that attested to the creative freedom of modern architecture in Shanghai as well as the prevailing European Art Deco style. It could be said that Lafuente's role in accomplishing this work was more akin to that of a French *ensemblier* of the 1920s than that of an architect of the 1930s. This was the last project in which he operated as an artisan of nineteenth century architecture. In the projects that followed, influenced by his Russian partner, Alexander Yaron, Lafuente's designs reflected a much purer style that was aesthetically more linear. This reorientation marked the beginning of the Californian phase of his professional trajectory.

The commission for the Majestic Hotel included 31 rooms intended for different uses and in different styles: the tea rooms, the various dining rooms, the great ballroom, the warehouses, the large Italian garden, and the pergolas and different entrances to each of the buildings that composed the ensemble. In short, this building, the size and style of which were remarkable, had an extraordinary architectural influence on hotels in Shanghai. Regrettably, it was destroyed a few years later after it was sold by the company.

Thus, Lafuente not only transformed a mansion into a hotel, but he also—marking a precedent for the HSH company—built an annex building, which was the most representative ballroom of the 1920s in Shanghai. The Majestic Hotel's ballroom was a dominant feature in Lafuente's personal portfolio that he sent to Spain. Specifically, he sent one copy to the editor of the newspaper, *La Nación* in Madrid in October 1926 and another copy to his family in Spain, dedicated to his only daughter, in January 1926 (Figure 12).

An authentic and exuberant amalgam of high-quality materials, composed in a neoclassical style, was applied in the half-point vaults, the semi-domes, the niches, as well as the central fountain in the large diaphanous space of the Majestic Hotel's ballroom. This large space was surrounded by an imposing marble colonnade comprising



Figures 9–11 Different views of the interior of the Majestic Hotel, (Source: Abelardo Lafuente’s Personal Portfolio from Lafuente Family Private Archive, cited in Leonardo Pérez 2019).

Figure 12 A view of the exterior of the Majestic Hotel with Lafuente’s original signature, 1926 (Source: Abelardo Lafuente’s Personal Portfolio from Lafuente Family Private Archive, cited in Leonardo Pérez 2019).

numerous columns with Corinthian capitals reminiscent of European theatres and palace salons, which were visually and formally connected with the immense Italian and French gardens surrounding the hotel. Despite the passing of many years, the Majestic Hotel’s ballroom has remained engraved in the city’s collective memory, probably because of its magnificent ornamental opulence as well as the celebrated public figures of the time who visited the hotel. A group photo taken at the door of the hotel with the captain of the cruise ship *Blas de Lezo* following the ship’s arrival in Shanghai in March 1927 to defend Spanish commercial interests in China, attests to the hotel’s popularity (*Periódico ABC* May 5, 1927). Moreover, given its prominence, and specifically its ballroom, in the

popular imaginary, the Majestic Hotel featured in a list of the wonders of the world visited by wealthy passengers aboard the *Empress of France* on a world cruise. This list, drawn up by the members of the Travel Club, comprised singular buildings, temples, and hotels as well as rivers, mountains, countries, islands, ports, streets, avenues, and roads.

The hotel’s inauguration at the end of 1924 coincided with the arrival in Shanghai of Lafuente’s second wife, Gretta Grey, who traveled from Los Angeles with their only son, Donald, born three years earlier in California. This detail is essential for understanding a major event in Lafuente’s professional career that occurred three years later.

From 1925 to 1926, Lafuente continued to be associated with the HSH company through his new studio, Lafuente & Yaron Architects, which was commissioned by the company to implement its last three projects located respectively in Shanghai, Shameen (Canton), and Hong Kong. There is no documentation relating to the renovation of the Kalee Hotel in Shanghai or of the Victoria Hotel in the British Shameen Concession. Of the three buildings, the one in Hong Kong is noteworthy, given its relevance. In his personal letters, Lafuente mentioned that he was working on a hotel in Kowloon in 1925; the only HSH hotel that was built in Hong Kong in that year was the famous Peninsula Hotel. Given that Lafuente, in this case working with his associate Alexander Yaron, was only responsible for the interior design, it is more than likely that the duo designed the lobby of Asia's most important hotel.

During this time, China was being shaken by waves of protest, and in 1925, Shanghai was the site of considerable unrest and violence. This situation, together with fierce professional competition compelled Antonio Ramos, nicknamed the 'King of the Cinemas', together with other Spanish businessmen, to leave the city and prepare for to depart for Spain. He put all of his properties up for sale (Toro Escudero 2012, 147) . At this time, increasing fear for their safety prompted foreigners living in Shanghai who had the means to leave to do so, resulting in a steady outflow that began in 1926 and did not cease until 1928.

On top of these events, the winter of 1925 was one of the decade's coldest winters in Shanghai. On December 30, all of the construction projects came to a halt because the concrete was freezing. Furthermore, the scaffolding of the 'Lafuente Building' (1926) fell from the third floor, leaving the building with four stories. This project was located in the vicinity of Bubbling Well Road, four blocks away from Ramos' movie theater and Cohen's garage, and it continues to reflect Lafuente's contribution to the multicultural and cosmopolitan face of Shanghai. In mid-1926, Lafuente and Yaron came to a (written) agreement that they would jointly sign documents for all subsequent projects, even though they would be located on different continents⁸. In a personal letter written in Spanish to one of his two sons (from his Spanish wife), Lafuente referred to his impending trip saying, 'I am going to California and New York to work on a temporary basis, although with plans to settle in Los Angeles because I have received important offers to move to Hollywood (Los Angeles) to build a grand and opulent ballroom similar to that of the Majestic'⁹.

Journey to California

On April 23, 1927, Lafuente set sail on the 'Korea Maru' from Shanghai bound for San Francisco. As a result of this journey, he added another continent to the ambit of his already illustrious career. Having married an American, his chances of success were much higher. His wife's return to Los Angeles appeared in the Angeleno press, suggesting she was a notable figure in the city. The journalist announced that she was married to a Shanghai architect and was returning to Los Angeles after an eight-year stay in Asia. The journalist added that the couple was to settle in Beverly Hills.

In 1928, Lafuente built at least two single-family residences in Beverly Hills (both currently standing), the largest of which was a mansion for his own family in the same neo-Arabic eclectic Spanish style that catapulted him to fame in Shanghai. As previously noted, he had built Ramos' mansion in this style, designing all the interiors, such as the dining room, the entrance lobby, and the central patio of the villa to have unique ceramic tiles for the flooring and the surrounding walls. This design reproduced the most iconic chambers of Alhambra Palace, known as the Hall of the Kings. He probably used tiles brought from Spain in Shanghai's villa. He also procured ceramic tiles from Valencia (Spain)¹⁰ to decorate the interiors of his mansion in Beverly Hills. However, he was unable to complete his own villa following his trademark neo-Arab style in California because he was forced to mortgage the residence just before its completion, and the plans were lost forever. This is the reason why the mansion is now mistakenly known in Beverly Hills as Casa Granada and remains anonymous. Lafuente was also commissioned to design the Panama Hotel in the city of the same name together with his former American partner, G.O. Wootten, who began corresponding with Lafuente after he moved to the United States. But this relationship is part of another story. Lafuente's journey was abruptly interrupted by the economic crash of 1929, leaving him bankrupt and ruining his hopes for achieving prosperity in the United States. He was forced to temporarily move alone to Tijuana (Mexico) to recover financially working in an environment that was more congenial for a Spanish architect. It was here that he completed his last project on the American continent, working in partnership with a local Mexican architect in Tijuana.

An unusual figure, whose professional training and experience were demonstrably polyhedral, Lafuente was an architect who clearly did not subscribe to academic dogma. He did not display a predominant style during his

career, and he sometimes merged the various architectural imaginaries demanded by his clients within a single project. There was only one exception to this norm, and this was the style that singled him out from the other architects in Shanghai: the Spanish neo-Arabic style that only his fellow Spaniards demanded of him. This rare ability to discern when to mix styles and when to follow orthodoxy distinguished Lafuente from other professional, classically trained architects and was a key driver throughout his career.

Lafuente first applied his idiosyncratic style while working with the Spanish community in Manila and subsequently in Shanghai when implementing projects for the minority communities that converged in the city (e.g., Jews, Russians and Filipinos). But, he predominantly applied it when working with Spanish religious groups and with the most influential members of the Spanish business community within the metropolis. He would have been similarly successful in California, where he moved with his wife, had his life project not been ruined for reasons beyond his control.

Despite not having a degree in architecture, Lafuente was able to create a body of work of such uniqueness and originality that he deserves recognition as an exceptional figure in the history of China's foreign architecture. His status in this regard is equal to that of Hudec, who arrived in the city without having any working background in China and established a reputation for creating unique works that are part of the widely known landscape of contemporary Shanghai. He accomplished this feat while remaining geographically isolated and without any direct influences on his professional development. He was also a strong advocate of the first modern and semi-Art Deco interiors in the aggressive and vibrant city of Shanghai, and his ballrooms influenced the designs of the next generation of architects in the city. Incidentally, Hudec was one of the few architects influenced by Lafuente's semi-Art Deco style, who undertook a significant detour during his journeys to Europe and the United States to visit the Alhambra Palace in Granada (Spain).

During a period when adventurers and *bon vivants*, swindlers and entrepreneurs flourished in Shanghai, although great value was placed on individuals' professional abilities, their intuition was the decisive factor. Equipped with insurmountable courage, perseverance, and drive while knowing that he was at a clear disadvantage with his competitors, Lafuente forged his own path. His built legacy too remains insurmountable, miraculously still standing almost a century after his untimely death. In a twist of fate, Lafuente died in Shanghai while staying at

the very hotel that he had remodeled for the second time a decade earlier; the Astor House Hotel.

Notes

1. Information from a SEABA microfilm no. 192 (South-East Asia Biographical Archive) page 320 from Rosenstock's Annual Press Reference Library from 1913. Philippine Edition, Manila. It was found at the Spanish National Library in Madrid and is referenced at Leonardo Pérez (2019, 500).
2. Refer to Figure 03.01 Shanghai Municipality Flag at Leonardo Pérez (2019, 73), which is extracted from French (2010, 45).
3. Refer to List of thirty-six projects built by Lafuente along his career, and precisely to the ones built in 1914 in Shanghai (Leonardo Pérez 2019, 311–429).
4. Refer to 'Third Supplement to the London Gazette' 1916 'List of traders' from August 14 at page 1 where the only officially registered architect from Spain at the list is the firm 'Lafuente & Wootten' Architects.
5. Refer to 'The Municipal Gazette' weekly information published on 1917 from Zikawei Library in Shanghai, cited in Leonardo Pérez (2019, 161).
6. Refer to List of thirty-six projects built by Lafuente along his career to see these four examples among others at Leonardo Pérez (2019, 311–429).
7. Refer to Chapter 14 Sheet 19 coming from Leonardo Pérez (2019, 367). For the photo of the flooring refer to Photo 14.47.
8. Refer to original Agreement Contract signed by both parties mentioned at pages 251–252 from Leonardo Pérez (2019) Original image of the contract at Annex 10.26 at page 625.
9. Refer to original letter in Spanish language dated April 24, 1927 from Leonardo Pérez (2019). Original image of the letter at Annex 10.25 at page 623–624.
10. Refer to shipment original letter documenting the tile package to be received in California from Leonardo Pérez (2019). Chapter 11 page 274 and Annex 11.01 at page 639.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank my doctorate supervisor and tutor, Miguel Angel Baldellou and Pilar Chías for their support throughout the phases of my research and dissertation writing, helping me to effectively organize all the ideas expressed herein my complete doctoral dissertation which are partially used here. I would like to especially thank

the Lafuente family for allowing me to consult their private library in Spain and giving me permission to publish all this original information in my doctoral dissertation after discovering it in their archive. I would also like to especially thank Rosemary Wakeman for her kind invitation to participate in this Special Issue and her efforts and constant help on steering my article in the right direction and giving my analysis proper clarity while adding grammatical and stylistic improvements to help readers better comprehend my contribution to the history of Shanghai's foreign architecture episode. I also thank Elena García-Herraiz for helping at translation for publication purposes as well as Radhika Johari from Liwen Bianji, Edanz Editing China (www.liwenbianji.cn/ac), for editing the English text of a draft of this manuscript.

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