

Reviews

Pilar Chías Navarro

Amoenitas loci, paupertas, caritas.

La arquitectura de la Universidad de Alcalá, hipótesis gráficas sobre la fundación de Cisneros

Universidad de Alcalá

Alcalá 2022

84 pp.

ISBN 978-84-09-46183-7



The book *Amoenitas loci, paupertas, caritas. La arquitectura de la Universidad de Alcalá, hipótesis gráficas sobre la fundación de Cisneros*, by Dr. Pilar Chías Navarro, suggests to recreate the lost image of the original architecture of the *Universitas Complutensis*, founded by Cardinal Cisneros in 1499. The author's proposal focuses on the reconstruction of the foundational nucleus, the so-called *Manzana Cisneriana*, whose construction began in March 1499 with the building of the *Colegio Mayor San Ildefonso*, a month before the *Carta bula Inter Caetera* was granted on 13 April of the same year.

Based on an exhaustive consciousness of the archival sources and available documentary information, such as Juan de Obando's plan of 1564, this book is characterised by extreme rigour and a deep knowledge of the history of the building and its designers. But it must be said that the proposal developed by the author is more than a mere architectural reconstruction, it is the restoration of the spirit behind its conception and construction by Cardinal Cisneros. For professor Chías, understanding the structural work of the *Manzana Cisneriana* is only possible from a full comprehension of the ideals and objectives that underpinned the foundational process itself, which ultimately means delving into the figure of the founder and the Regenerationist principles that characterised the Spanish church of his time.

For this purpose, the author explores the written text and the historical image to reconstruct an architectural form closely linked to the Cisneros' idea of Catholic spirituality, for whom the academic foundation he was undertaking had to combine the need to promote the new way of approaching knowledge introduced in Spain by the incipient Humanism with the Catholic tradition that the new cognition could not and should not call into question. This duality justifies the three Latin concepts that begin the title of the work, reflecting both the humanist character, which is evident in the principles set out by Vitruvius in his treatise for determining the foundation place, and the values of modesty and charity proper to an institution of full Christian will. It is no coincidence, in this respect, that it was precisely in Alcalá where, in 1582, the first translation into Spanish of the Vitruvian treatise was published in the printing press of Juan Gracia, that made by Miguel de Urrea almost a century after the first printed Italian edition, which took place in Rome in 1486 by Giovanni Sulpicio da Veroli; this delay does not prevent us from validating the hypothesis that the architects in charge of the work entrusted by Cardinal Cisneros were aware of it, since the treatise was widely circulating on the peninsula at that time and was part of the Hispanic architectural culture. At the same time, the reference to Christian values such as *paupertas* and *caritas*

frames Cisneros' work within the Franciscan ideals of the Cardinal's religious instruction, which serves the author not only to deepen the symbiosis between Reason and Faith that characterised the academic training given at the *Universitas Complutensis*, but also to understand the material austerity of the work, which, although it responded to traditional building practices from the construction point of view, perfectly served the idea of modesty that nourished Cisneros' own religious convictions.

However, despite the use of documentary and iconographic sources and the enquiry into the understanding of the cultural purposes of the foundation is extremely rigorous, Professor Chías opens up an interesting area of reflection on the objectives of this type of graphic reconstructions. She addresses the role played in the whole process by the potential of drawing to recover and convey immaterial aspects such as the sensations perceived in the architectural space itself, the draftsman's interpretation in the conversion of the founder's ideas into real architectural spaces, and the intuitions derived from the vision of an era starting with the set of cultural aspects that characterise it, such as literature or painting, which allow us to "visualise" the yearnings and aspirations of an epoch.

In the first part of the book, the author discusses the capacity of today's university architecture, profoundly transformed, to transmit the values of the original structural form and the role played by drawing in the process. A process that is based on reason, study and learning of the architectural theory and practice of a period, but also on the capacity of sketch to convey images and intuitions, transferring to reality our way of understanding the past from our personal experiences.

In the first area, the author extrapolates architectural forms from other works to recreate the possible original façade, transposing the design intentions expressed in the round-arched façade of the *Convento de la Imagen* in Alcalá to propose the reconstruction of the potential first design of the Cisneros' foundation façade. An element that would respond much more plausibly to the austere aspirations of the Cardinal and to the foreshortened perception that must have characterised the urban fabric at the time of its construction than the current magnificent façade, designed by Luis de Vega in 1537 and built by Rodrigo Gil de Hontañón from 1541 onwards. This is a process which, in addition to translating the will of Cisneros himself, is fully architectural, in that it interprets the way in which early Renaissance Castilian architecture applied the forms that came from Italy. In this respect, the author makes use of the treatise by Diego de Sagredo, who in 1526 brought to press his *Medidas del Romano*, the first architectural writing printed in Europe in the Romance language and which, despite its modest contribution to Renaissance architectural theory, perfectly reflected the way of doing things of the Spanish designers of the time.

All this attests the rigour of the reconstructive work carried out by the author and her knowledge of the architecture of the period. But what I find most interesting is the reflection that accompanies this fully academic process of rebuilding; a thought of a personal nature, which links it to the author's experience in spaces that she has been visiting for twenty years now, and to the vision of an era that, constructed and assimilated through knowledge, feeds the whole process through the image. The author reconstructs the

architecture both through words and drawing, giving it a fundamental role in the work of understanding and rebuilding the lost architecture, and with the latter the set of intentions and longings that nourished it and to which it gave form; perhaps because drawing has the capacity to integrate in an image both what is known and evoked.

The author alludes to this accumulation of experiences and sensations that underlie the whole process, interrelating objective data with subjective feelings; reinterpreting historical data and graphic documents through an experience that transposes them into spatial forms. This is the approach that characterises a book that differs from other academic methodologies developed from other disciplines, and in which the drawing and the associated gaze make possible a sensorial depth that the written text, with its greater descriptive capacity, lacks. From drawing and experience, the author seeks to do more than outline the original architectural space; she tries, in her words, to define "rhythms that still enclose the *Manzana Cisneriana*, echoes of times gone by that have happily come down to us and that only require the quiet enjoyment of these centenary spaces to allow revealing themselves" [p. 22].

A final reflection on the author's previous quotation. At the beginning of her text, both in the introduction and in the first pages that follow, professor Chías repeatedly alludes to the sensations and experiences that the city and the university transmit. The whole reconstructive process, firmly based on the author's previous documentation and erudition, is ultimately conditioned by our way of perceiving them; of feeling them. This is how the author explains it when she says that "the gaze, like the other senses, is not innocent and

is trained, just like the draftsman's hand; and it is enriched by the artist's interpretations, very useful for approaching the suggestive sphere of graphic artifice and subjectivity" [p. 19].

The author herself provides a beautiful metaphor that transcends mere academic and erudite reconstruction, when she claims to have imagined the *apostador* (chamberlain) José Nieto

coming out of the chapel panelled door; interpreting the present-day architecture by inserting an image taken from *Las Meninas* painting. An image that endows the space not only with the original formal, metric, and spatial features, but also gives shape to the echoes of the past and the lives spent when they still preserved their original form. Reconstructing is a mental operation that

imagines what was from the data we know as much as from the images that our mind recreates; an activity that is necessarily based on the images to "find the subtle indications of time and rhythm whose echoes, as Muñoz Molina said, have been shaping the score of such a singular building" [p. 42].

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