
Providing Shape to Madrid's Urban Space

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ABSTRACT. Madrid is a convent town. Its urban tissue is still partially dependant on the large number of XVII and XVIII-C convents that it used to have. Some of these buildings still stand up surviving over densification and speculation as proper green islands within an extremely dense urban tissue. Others, although disappeared, have left a perceptible footprint in the city. This paper approaches what is considered the main contribution of these spaces to a cultural landscape: urban transformations and cultural identity. Thereby, this study focuses on the transformation of these convents and how the urban fabric around them has evolved. Urban voids related with these complexes have evolved associated with changes in society, and although they have lost their religious character, they still retain a strong identity and are a key piece of the identity and the memory of the city.

KEYWORDS: Convent, historical landscape, Madrid, urban plan, open spaces, transformation.

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Madrid convent town (1)

In 1561, Madrid was designated capital city of the Spanish Empire by King Philip II. As it needed to be transformed into a suitable location for the Court, the city suffered important urban changes. Not only major refurbishments were carried out in the "Alcazar", the king's residence, but also, following the religious fervor of the moment, numerous religious orders set up in the city under the protection of the Crown. The most prominent families followed the King's example building new palaces and establishing new convents under their patronage. Thus, the city gained a characteristic look: it neither resembles a typical late medieval town, as other European capital cities, where a great cathedral dominates a compact walled concentric core, neither gave the idea of a Renaissance town. The only eminent construction, outstanding over the rest, was the Alcazar (García Hípola et al. 2011). However, the most important elements of the urban landscape were those religious constructions whose towers, pinnacles and spires stand out over the rest.

The convents took up outstanding areas, incorporating open spaces such as cloisters, private patios, orchards and kitchen gardens. What is more, their location and founders' support provided them with special legal conditions, rules and norms that favoured their conservation. They were autonomous and isolated cells, which contributed to the development of the Christian city. Not only were they the core of new neighborhoods but they also had an important role on their management.

Therefore, Madrid's historical center (figure 1) and its ecological landscape have been conditioned by these buildings. They occupied one third (259 hm²) of its total surface (777 hm²), and their gardens and orchards were the only green spaces within the city walls. The great amount of land that they devoted to these open spaces had a strong impact on the ecology of the urban fabric of the city. They lowered urban density while functioning as green lungs of the city, playing a vital role in its healthiness. (Rodríguez Romero et al. 2012)

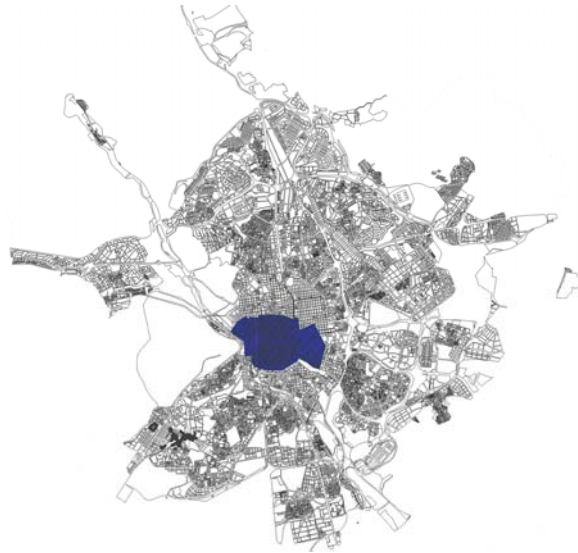


Figure 1. Madrid`s historic centre is the area enclosed beneath 1625's city walls.

2- Urban evolution in the XIX and XX-C. From solid to hole.

This urban landscape remains unchanged during the XVII and XVIII C. However in the XVIII-C the city begins to change due to the rise of the Bourbon dynasty. As capital city of the court Madrid would renew his image according to the French taste. New cultural facilities and a new Royal Palace will be built after the fire of the Alcázar in 1734. Major changes will be made in the urban plot with the creation of the Paseo del Prado, which will create an N-S axis that still today is the vertebral spine of the city. Around it, new illustrated-character public buildings will arise. The city will transform from close and medieval to illustrate and modern, with new spaces of representation, secular, open and well ventilated. Clearly, the contrast with the inherited urban form is clear.

However, the impression made by these reforms (planned by King Carlos III and carried out between 1759 and 1788) was less notable than expected, and the city did not experience a substantial growth. Next to this period of reforms Madrid entered into lethargy, which continued until the XIX-C when it was suddenly interrupted by an extraordinary population growth that forced the expansion of the city limits.

Regarding convents and monasteries there were few changes. Although the number of foundations decreased over the century they continued to have a dominant role in the structure of the city. Only at the end of the century, when the first confiscation of church property took place in Spain, the role of these constructions in the city began to change.

Confiscations or Disentitlement Processes became very important during the next 130 years. Through these processes the Government confiscated Church's properties, usually to sell them to private buyers, obtaining in that way economic resources. However, sometimes the buildings were demolished and the grounds were given to the city. Thus, urban voids were created in order to generate a new urban order. That was the case of the confiscation carried by Joseph I (French occupation took place between 1808 and 1813), when numerous convents were demolished to create public spaces (Sambricio, 2008. 83).

Before the arrival of the French troops, there were 146 religious buildings in Madrid. Among them, 36 were male convents and 32 were convents from nuns. In February, 1809 a new legislation established that 24 male convents and 21 female convents must be demolished. Although not all the demolitions were carried out, some of these buildings did disappear. For example, this was the case of Mostenses, San Bernardino, Santa Clara, Santa Catalina, Pasion and Santa Ana. Thanks to this, the Napoleonic Government was able to develop a new urban planning policy that was the birth of Madrid's modern urbanism (Sambricio, 2008. 89). What is more, the decision to reduce the number of convents was the most revolutionary of all the ones that Joseph I took, as not only the urban reality of the Spanish cities changed, but also infrastructures that until this moment have never been planned, were created.

After the French abandoned Spain, King Ferdinand VII De Bourbon reinstated many of the possessions seized and restored church's old privileges. Nevertheless, the seed of change was already sowed. The Confiscation Laws of 1836 and 1855 continued transforming that monastic image of the city as the number of convents and monasteries was again reduced. The gardens and courtyards of the monasteries that did not disappear were forced to reduce their size due urban pressure and the nun's economic needs (VVAA, 1995. 317-319)

In 1868 the old ramparts of the Felipe IV were demolished and the urban expansion directed by Carlos Maria de Castro started, ordering the extension towards north, east and south side. Population pressure increased urban density and numerous "corralas", dense communal dwellings, were rose. The general height increased and courtyards and open spaces were occupied. The image of Madrid was progressively adapting to the taste of the new bourgeois class, with the erection of large neoclassical and historicist buildings, in places previously taken by churches and convents, many of them displaced and dispossessed in successive confiscations. Urban parks were created, following XIX-C European models, as the gradual densification and pollution of cities demanded large leisure clean areas. We must point out, that, until this moment the gardens and cloisters of our convents were the only green spaces of the city. As a result of all these changes, the low profile of the city and its provincial air coming from by small-scale poor buildings would disappear forever.

This transforming fever continued in the early twentieth century, the successful epoch-making that was the construction of the "Gran Vía", with skyscrapers never seen before, established a clear precedent. Within this reforming zeal, other downtown public spaces were remodeled. Among this initiatives, we must highlight

the competition to remodel the Encarnación`s loggia. The irrepressible urban development was only interrupted by the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939).

Moreover, the bombing caused profound damages on religious buildings and on the city landscape. After the war, unable to survive, due to urban pressure and economic needs the nuns were forced to sell their homes and move to suburban locations. For example this was the case of Sacramento`s nuns.

The 21st century is bringing several issues about the future relationships between these spaces and the urban form. In the era of telecommunications a decline in individual mobility and a concentration of activities along transport corridors can be expected. This process is making cities to lost their cultural identities, because of that the preservation of these urban spaces, and their accommodation to the citizens needs is vital to their preservation.

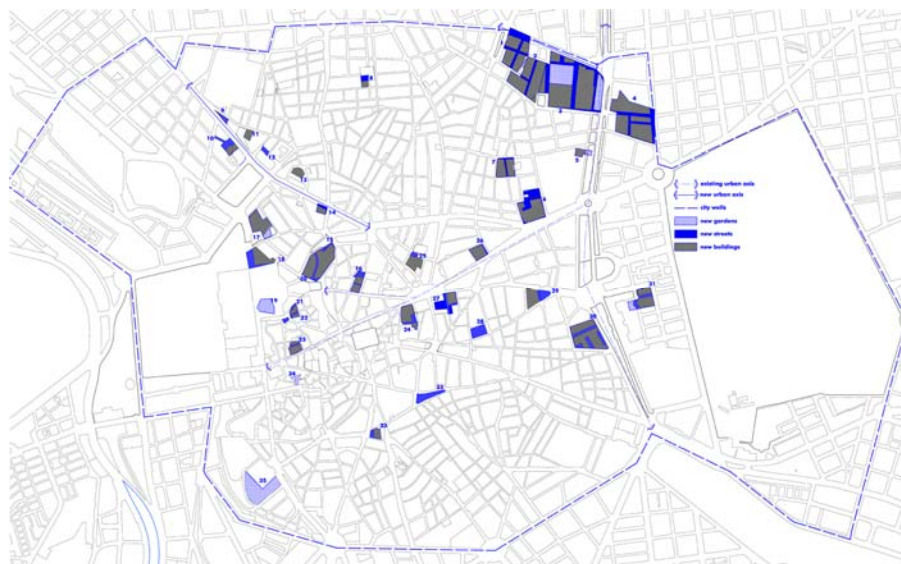


Figure 2. Demolished convents in Madrid`s historic center. In dark blue we can see the surface dedicated to create streets or squares. In light blue the surface dedicate to gardens and in grey the surface dedicated to the construction of new buildings.

3-Making the city: public space created by demolished convents. Study cases.

As it has been explained, Madrid`s urban plot changed during the XIX and XX-C from solid to hole due to economic and ideological reasons. Religious building played an important role in the transformation of the urban landscape, as they occupied one third of the total surface of the city at the beginning of the XVIII-C.

Disentitlement Processes were the instrument used by different governments to reduce the number of convents and monasteries.

Although 35 convents totally or partially disappeared between 1798 and 1970, not in all the cases their sites remained free of new constructions or originated public space. In many occasions new buildings and streets were traced over their plots. In these cases only the squares and loggias that gave access to the church remains. These squares played an important role in the Baroque scenery. They were used by the faithful for worship, processions, outer altars, etc. They were a result of the ritual established in the Counter-Reformation, which demanded that public space next to the church's entrance. Thus, the importance of these gaps as public scenarios is such, that still today they played that role among the citizens that are able to recognize them as spaces that belong to the city and not only to the church.

However, when the sites remained free, a void is opened in the urban plot. The new square usually has the same shape that the former building, which leaves trace of its history. This phenomenon is very common in all historical center and sometimes, extremely interesting (I ex, Rome's Piazza Navona that has the shape of a Roman's circus).

In Madrid examples of this were the convents and monasteries of: Santa Ana (founded in 1586 demolished in 1810), Merced (founded in 1564 demolished in 1840), Maravillas (founded in 1616 demolished in 1840), San Martín (founded in 1126 demolished in 1868), San Hermenegildo (founded in 1742 demolished in 1870), Santa Catalina (founded in 1510 demolished in ?) and Carmen (founded in 1575 demolished in the early XX-C).

All of them disappeared leaving an urban gap that was colonized by citizens. As we can see in figure number 3, When the Convent of Merced was demolished, Tirso de Molina square was created and a node appeared in the city (Lynch, 1960).



Fig. 3 Merced convent, 1656 and Tirso de Molina square, 2012.

In other cases, usually when the building was partially demolished or disentailed, green open spaces appeared. After the partial demolition of these monasteries only the churches and gardens remained unchanged. These spaces were transformed into semi-public gardens, that stills preserve some of its religious and historical identity.

This was the case of San Francisco el Grande (founded in 1217 and partially demolished in 1760), Salesas Reales (founded in 1748, demolished in 1838) and Sacramento (founded in 1615, partially demolished in 1970's).



Fig. 4 Salesas Reales in 1860 and in 2012.

This is easy recognizable in Figures 4 and 5. In the case of Salesas Reales only the Queens Garden remains and it has been transformed in Paris' Square. The most interesting characteristic of this space is that it allows us to observe and understand the city and the architectural volumes of the Monastery as the nuns did.

In the case of the Sacramento the surface dedicated to the garden and their walls have remained unchanged, and we are able to see it as the nuns did in the XVIII-C (Anton Barco et al, 2010. 55).



Fig. 5 Sacramento's garden

4. Conclusions

Madrid's urban form remains similar of that of the XVIII-C despite the great number of transformations it has suffered. Proof of this is that numerous monasteries and convents still exist, remains and witness of an era.

Urban evolution in the XIX and XX-C transformed the city, which changed from solid to hole. New open spaces were created over the plots of disintegrated and demolished monasteries, and the gardens and courtyards of the monasteries that survive, were green islands in the new urban plot.

Urban voids related with these religious complexes have evolved associated with changes in society, and although they have lost their religious character, they still retain a strong identity and are a key piece of the identity and the memory of the city

5. Notes

1. This paper is part of the Investigation Project: "Providing Shape to Madrid's Urban Space. Disappeared Convents and Religious Buildings" HAR2011-28023/ARTE supported by Research Secretary, Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness, I+D Plan 2008-2011

6. Legends

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