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# Historic cities (A drama of our time)

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The problem of the fate or destiny that historic cities must endure is extremely serious and, in my opinion, it must be listed as one of the core concerns. What is to be done with these cities, which are the majority, in the Old World? The rest of the educated world will not be indifferent to whatever is done in Segovia or Toledo or Salamanca. I believe Unamuno was the one who said: I want to write the universal history of Cerezo de Abajo.<sup>1</sup>



**ALCÁZAR, SEGOVIA.**

*Image: Magdalena Rojas Vences, 2013.*

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<sup>1</sup> Cerezo de Abajo is a municipality located in the province of Segovia, in Spain. Note from the translator.

By touching the delicate fabric of one of these cities, we put our finger on the wound of a universal cancer, and we apply a therapy, timely or brutal, that is of great importance to our cultural universe. If a justifiably angry minority wakes up in defense of the values of Toledo, Segovia or Seville, these screams of anguish, which will undoubtedly be followed by others, are similar to those heard in all countries. We hear even louder the screams of the ones nearest to us, and they affect us more because they are from our close relatives who we see in the process of disappearing in the hands of doctors and managers or quack healers. But those screams ring out all over the world. *Arts* magazine wept over the despoiled "vieux quartiers" of Paris. The *Sunday Times* made our hair stand on end in face of the destruction of the charming little towns of Kent, Essex and Suffolk. Furthermore, an article by Walter Gropius, deeply pessimistic about the urban environment of our cities, was published in the *Revista de Occidente*; coming from such an author, it has greater importance and significance, and that article was, in great part, the inspiration for this text. If Gropius, the great renovator of our visual environment, the man who only a few years ago trusted the relationships of an architecture and an urbanism that he had promoted, feels perplexed, what will become of those of us who already had numerous doubts?

This evil is universal, grave and distressing. Therefore, we cannot cross our arms and stand idly by, nor believe that it can be resolved through state provisions, which can be more or less correct and not necessarily enforced. This is not enough. It would be the necessary but insufficient complement. State action today is very crude and primitive. It must be perfected, streamlined and enjoy an efficiency that it does not currently have. However, even in spite of that, it will always be complementary to consciousness, culture and urban education.<sup>2</sup>

In the first place, I believe that we should all start reflecting upon this evil and, if possible, let the light of understanding illuminate us. Today we think less and less because in our decadent civilization, we have replaced the thinker with the technician; the technician has the privilege of not thinking because thinking is equivalent to doubting, and the professional cannot doubt. The technician is an anointed person and is infallible and omniscient by the fact of being so.

The technician is turning into a type of new aristocracy, already suffering from the defects and vices of conduct that precipitated the decline of the blood aristocracy. The aristocrat, by virtue of being one, has been everything since his cradle, and no matter how hard he tries to add something personally, he will not be able to rise in the consideration of his peers. This leads to discouragement and lack of encouragement. The same will happen with the technicians as soon as they feel anointed from the start and, therefore, without the need to advance. Thinking will lead them nowhere, and a fidelity to certain myths and formulas, and an aversion to certain taboos will suffice to guide their behavior.

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<sup>2</sup> International organizations, such as UNESCO and the Council of Europe have taken action in the matter of the alarming transformation of the European scene. UNESCO, at its XII Conference, held in Paris in November 1962, agreed to recommend to all State Parties the adoption of a series of measures aimed at "the safeguarding of the beauty and character of landscapes and sites [... meaning] the preservation and, where possible, the restoration of the aspect of natural, rural and urban landscapes and sites, whether natural or man-made, which have a cultural or aesthetic interest or form typical natural surroundings".

UNESCO itself has just founded a "non-governmental" organization, the International Council of Monuments and Sites.

The Council of Europe, at its V meeting held in Strasbourg in January 1964, also adopted several resolutions in the same vein, the spirit of which is reflected in the report on "La défense et la mise en valeur des sites et ensembles historiques ou artistiques" by Professor Ludwig Weiss, from Vienna.

The following statement is an extract from this critical report: "At the very moment in which Europe acquires an unprecedented economic and social momentum, and because of this momentum, the protection of the remnants of its past, becomes an urgent necessity. Not only are the threats multiplying in direct proportion to this development, but the significance and importance of the threatened sites and monumental centers is becoming more evident every day."

If, to the condition of a technician one adds that of a bureaucrat, we will obtain a centaur in which self-esteem and strength will be united. This hybrid will not easily condescend to dialogue, nor will it let anyone influence its determination. Let us take into account all the very honorable exceptions we may wish to. However, this egocentric technician abounds more every day and every day has a more decisive influence on the group's behavior. Powerful support for this lies in the fact that the country is thinking less and less and, what is more serious, that thinking becomes more and more ineffective. The intellectuals in our country continue to have a bad reputation. Their lever or tool is usually opposition and negation and, therefore, thinking is seen as something eminently destructive. For the calm bourgeois conscience, the words *against this and that* of Unamuno have been the best argument that the intellectual is a kind of devastating madman.

However, I ask myself: if we do not act now against what is being done in the old historic cities, if we do not place ourselves intellectually against "this" and against "that," are we being constructive? None of that; not going against this evil is letting such evil prevail. If we do not oppose it, if we do not mount a closed and vigilant guard to at least denounce the excesses that are perpetrated before us, we will allow real places that we dearly love to perish due to an excess of conformity and good sense. Crusades have never been sensible, and this crusade against the demise of our monumental cities does not have to be either.

So let us accept that we must think about why this is happening and that we should not fear finding the underlying cause of our thinking, just as we should not fear that others will find theirs and contradict us. We could start by analyzing some of the causes, or presumed causes, that justify our alarm. Let us observe the case as if we were medical doctors and were called to diagnose the condition of a seriously ill patient. We have to first study the clinical situation before prescribing anything. For my part, I do not want to propose any plan now; I am more interested in discussing the disease than dictating a few prescriptions.

That cities are sick, there is no doubt, and the fact that this disease somewhat resembles this other more frightening one, which stalks humans, seems a cruel irony of our destiny. As if Mother Nature constantly repeated her procedures by a lack of resources. In the Middle Ages, cholera and plague decimated, like withering blows, the shaken populations. Lightning, fires and terrifying catastrophes also destroyed large and small cities with the same violence, as if they were biblical condemnations. The *modus operandi*, at least, was apparently the same.

Today, the human being has constantly hung over his fragile philosophy, like the sword of Damocles, a specter that does not cover the classic forms of the exterminator, but others more evasive and cunning. It undermines the organism and destroys it without anyone or anything being able to prevent it. Something similar happens to cities, subject to the same degeneration. On the one hand, it is an abnormal growth and reproduction of cells that destroy the living organism. On the other hand, it is a monstrous growth—demographic explosion—with the consequent chaos and disorder, which destroys the urban fabric. This macabre parallel puts us in both cases before the sad reality of our helplessness.

On the one hand, we do not know the causes of this cellular degeneration. On the other hand, we only sense those that destroy the urban fabric. However, these are so many, so complex, their mutual relationship and dependence so intricate, that we get lost in their impenetrable labyrinth, and we let ourselves be led by circumstances.

The typical cities of our civilization degenerate in front of our eyes despite the acceptable partial achievements with which the most optimistic can console us. The existence of some concrete successes in terms of architecture and urban planning cannot hide from us the failure of our cities today. Some blame it on the old cities, whose structures have unsuccessfully tried to adapt to current needs. The position of blaming our own mistakes on our predecessors, on a

rich and paralyzing inheritance, is always comforting. This would all be very well if, in the cases of modern cities, newly founded and established, had the result been satisfactory. However, let us contemplate the new world, where so many cities have been born without the noose of history, the balance of failure will stun us. For example, we cannot but largely attribute the destitution of our current urban planning to the United States, an eminently representative nation. The American has passed from the rural environment to the jungle of asphalt and concrete without knowing the city, and his blindness to some realities, which Europe lovingly modeled in the *slow tempo* of history, has had the consequence of extirpating them from the current picture of human aspirations.

The current human being no longer aspires to live in a city that accompanies, enlightens and educates him, the city that is the common residence where he lives with his fellow citizens, where the memory of noble deeds persists and the outstanding achievements of his ancestors continue to live. He only needs the city instrumentally, to facilitate his business, as a showcase to expose his merchandise and increase his sales figures, as a market to acquire those goods that increase his material comfort, as a center for contracting more or less forbidden pleasures.

With crude and expressive strokes, Ortega describes the feverish center of Buenos Aires as follows: "In Corrientes and the nearby streets filled with banks and offices, this atrocious industrial fauna strives. They are the men who have come to their own business with an urgent appetite and who, as they pass by you, dislocate your shoulder because they are speeding to finish their business. With barren imagination, their hunger is all the more ferocious because they do not want things they have imagined and would have to create. Instead, they want what is already there in the store window. They need to buy a car, a gramophone, a radio and a refrigerator. For such a specific need, they are splendidly endowed with the three necessary qualities: boldness, rudeness and haste" (Ortega y Gasset, vol. VIII, p. 408).<sup>3</sup> How are we going to ask such human beings to be permeable to the charm of the cities of the past, to know how to interpret their evocative language, which is so clear and transparent for the historian, the poet, the artist, the cultivated man of taste?



STORE WINDOW, BUENOS AIRES. Image: Pedro Rojas, 1977.

<sup>3</sup> No reference was added in the original text, but it is an excerpt from the "Balada de los barrios distantes", contained in the *Obras Completas*, Tomo VII (1958-1959), published by *Revista de Occidente*. Note from the translator.

Walter Gropius, the great architect of the Bauhaus, is equally aware of the desolation and ugliness of our current urban landscape. However, faithful to an old ideology, which he has to support, he does not see in our time a constitutive incapacity but rather a temporary one. He believes that an intelligent education and some drastic measures can achieve a transformation of our environment. According to Gropius, the civilization of the 20th century can take pride in its achievements and abandon all shyness and sentimentality when judging and deciding on its own manifestations. The more positive and constructive the attitude of the average citizen concerning his time, the sooner the custodians of our visual environment –architects and urban planners– can give it order and a meaningful form. We are not going to enter into controversy with Gropius now, many of whose ideas we do not share, because what we fundamentally want is to highlight his repeated insistence on the absence of visual education.



**WALTER GROPIUS**

*Image: Hans G. Conrad. Walter Gropius on the terrace of the Hochschule für Gestaltung (HfG) in Ulm, on October 1, 1955 during the celebration of the inauguration of the buildings, René Spitz Collection.*

The lack of a visual education is the first obstacle we always run into when we come across the unfortunate situation of our cities, old and new. As we have said, if the city is nothing more than a mere instrument, the lack of interest in its historical, cultural and artistic values cannot surprise us. The education that Gropius demands has to start first from an aspiration: that the city must fulfill other objectives than the simply functional ones. If this was enough for humanity..., then we should turn it off and go away.

Another question: Gropius asks for cities of our time to be dignified and ennobled, to satisfy the spiritual and aesthetic needs of today's man. Let us suppose that this happens and we would all rejoice and congratulate ourselves. Let us suppose that the human being of today, finally, lives in cities that are functionally irreproachable and, moreover, beautiful, harmonious and orderly. Assuming that this, which is utopian, happens, I want to make an observation that seems to me of a certain magnitude. This ideal carries with it that man would have to



abandon the cities that he has lived in up to today, leave some as museums for tourists and occupy the new ones or those that are recreated from head to toe. Nevertheless, here, we fall into another problem. Those new cities will also cease to be so; they will cease to adapt to future forms of life, to future advances in technology. What to do then? Abandon them again, freezing some of them as museum pieces. Will we have to do something similar to what the Islamic civilization did? As Francisco Benet says, "The European and Islamic cities differ in their formative process. The Islamic city was often a passing affair, the brief adventure of a rising dynasty that ambitioned a seat for its power and a worthy memorial of its passage. The earth in Islam is pockmarked with the skeletons of dead cities, and those that passed the test of time have inherited, for a relatively limited tradition, large domains and undisputed gravitational fields. In our cities, the process of decline and renewal goes on all the time; we build on the same decaying corpses, and we manage a mildly successful attempt at urban eternity." This is what Benet calls the parallax method instead of the palimpsest method.<sup>4</sup> According to this, the increasingly advanced technological process will lead us Westerners to fall back on old solutions from nomadic countries, which contradict a deep and radical trend of the Western man. If the Western man has always lived on top of the same cities and following the palimpsest method, if he has always returned to write on the same parchment, it has been because the soil of the ancestors has always had something sacred; life could only sprout on that which in turn had been life rather than on empty ground, as a camp or factory arises. In the fundamental rites of the ancient cities, the founders used to bring soil from their place of origin to sanctify the new site so that it could thus continue to be the homeland, the land of their forefathers. The concepts of continuity and progress, typical of Western man, are based on these and other deep feelings of the same type.

We cannot, therefore, understand for many reasons that such a revolution can take place and that from now on, we will indulge in Penelope's toils, weaving and unweaving cities.

We have discussed that if something like this were to occur, we would leave some eminent cities as museum pieces, saved from destruction, as the exceptionally brave and noble fighting bull is saved from the final fate. This also seems puerile to me, since, if the monumental cities belong to the entire humanity, they do not, therefore, cease to belong to their children and in that serious scrutiny, who will be the one to inform dwellers of this or that locality that their city is bound to perish?

Nor do I think that an inhabitant from Seville, Toledo or Salamanca would be amused to know that their city, and to some extent, they were to become part of a museum. The relationship of man with his city, of the man who loves his traditions, his past, his monuments, etcetera, is far from a relationship similar to that of a museum. It is a much less straightforward relationship, as can be easily understood. One does not live in the city; one coexists and relives in it. Because such a city is like this, people coexist in a certain way with their neighbors; because the city is such, one constantly relives from it a past that is an evident pledge that we will also have a past and that, therefore, what we do now has a meaning. The city, as I said on another occasion, is the daughter and archive of history; in other words, it is palpable proof of a process of slow social biography. If nothing was to remain of that process, the city would cease to be the reliquary of our memories, it would cease to be an archive, and everyone would wander through it as foreigners, even if they were natives from many generations. This vital and biographical relationship is what unites a man with his city, but we can also lose it and become nomads or migrants. This is the case of so many cities in the New World, of so

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<sup>4</sup> F. Benet. *The Ideology of Islamic Urbanization*. (*International Journal of Comparative Sociology*). (Vol. IV. Num. 2. September 1963, pp. 211-226).

many cities in Argentina that were hastily made by immigrants, by people without roots, who were not planning to settle, but rather to become rich and move on. Today their descendants, fixed there by the laws of life, feel unhappy, deeply unhappy. Without being so, they also feel like immigrants, strangers in their city. What a terrible thing! They have nothing in their city that is a reason for creating fond memories, nothing that awakens or evokes a past, no beautiful corner to stop and dream of. What a terrible orphanhood! They settled there to make money, and they are still held by economic forces, ungrateful and harsh, from which they cannot be released. The city that surrenders to the golden calf, which begins to feel like an exploitable reality, translatable into money, is a lost city; the cancer of its economic expansion will devour it.

What we have just said does not prevent that in the face of the ailments that afflict our cities in their accelerated growth, it is not necessary to promote the birth of new ones. This has nothing to do with the condemnation of the "parallax" method referred to earlier. What we condemned was the replacement of old cities with new ones, abandoning the former. However, founding cities is not only necessary but undoubtedly urgent. Old cities cannot grow indefinitely because that would entail their destruction. Alfred Sauvy, in a conference recently delivered in Madrid, entitled "Le développement économique et les villes.",<sup>5</sup> referred to the intractable problems posed today by large urban agglomerations, both with regard to housing and circulation. The latter is genuinely insoluble since the street surface that private vehicles intend to occupy, both in motion and stopped, exceeds what can be available to citizens. The motorist, as Georges Rottier has also said, does not pay for the urban services he consumes and for the damage he inflicts on the community.<sup>6</sup> This causes, on the one hand, a poor organism, and on the other one, an increase in the flow of immigration to the cities, which would be less if each one participated proportionally in the installation costs.

According to Sauvy, the prohibition of private cars to circulate in urban areas will be unavoidable in a short time and cities will be forced to rely on public transportation for the movement of citizens. As we said in an article published in this same journal (number 8), there is no possible coexistence between the car and the city; only one or the other can win. Meanwhile, we use half measures and what we achieve is totally negative because we do not solve the problem and we destroy the cities, which means a loss of cultural, artistic and, ultimately, human values.

In Sauvy's opinion, a judgment that we share, it is necessary to abandon the impractical pretense of reforming the current cities to accommodate them to a new situation; firstly, it is materially impossible to do so since the speed in the change of needs and techniques to subsidize them anticipates any reform plan, and secondly, because it leads to irreparable losses.

On the other hand, a plan to create new cities, a plan that encounters much resistance –undoubtedly the fruit of vested interests– would not only solve the long problem of rational distribution of the population, but it would also be the only way to save traditional cities from disappearing and of making, without restrictions, an organism that is worthwhile. The task of founding an entirely new great city is, of course, difficult and complex. It seems that, even from the point of view of social order and morality, the entirely new city presents arduous problems. In new urban developments, for example, the rate of child crime is higher. The old city, with its solidly rooted structures, its habits and customs, is an obvious brake on society.

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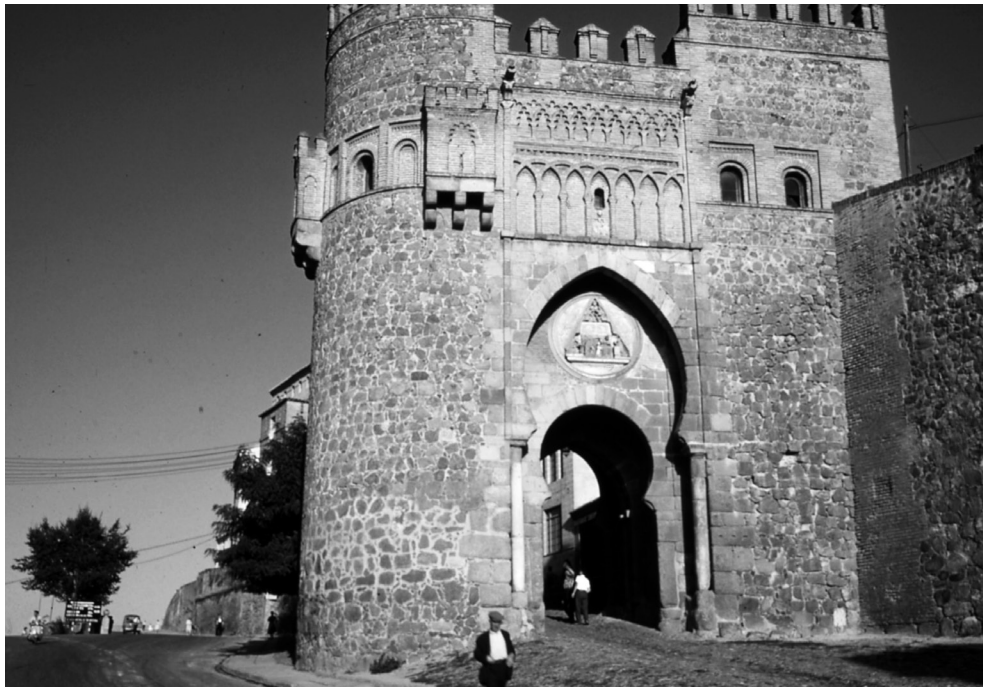
<sup>5</sup> Faculty of Political and Economic Sciences, at the Universidad de Madrid, on 3 November 1964.

<sup>6</sup> George Rottier. Spud. *Recherchu el Débats*. (Cuaderno núm. 38).



In any case, it is necessary for humanity to make this attempt, considering from the beginning that this new city will soon cease to be new and will, in turn, begin to live as a historical entity.

When the implantation of an industrial estate around Toledo was recently discussed, with opinions for all tastes, we opposed it for obvious reasons.<sup>7</sup> The arguments of the administration technicians who drew up the plan were based on the need to decongest Madrid by taking advantage of the natural conditions of the Vega del Tajo, which allowed a prosperous economy. However, could this not be an occasion to plan a new city between Toledo and Aranjuez, for example, in Añóver de Tajo or Castillejo? But a new and entirely different city, far from the current ones and, above all, from a city as exceptional as Toledo, which, both due to its history and its structure, cannot be the head of an industrial agglomeration. Using Toledo as a city center of an industrial area is as incongruous as thinking that a medieval castle can be used to install a steel factory.



TOLEDO. Image: Pedro Rojas, 1959.

Toledo has a specific high function in national life, and distorting it by seeking impossible compromises between such heterogeneous realities, which constitute the reality of Toledo and of the industrial area, cannot result in anything good. Toledo could cease to be Toledo, and the industrial area may not become what it should be.

It is a miracle that Toledo has come down to us in a surprising state of preservation. Can we cancel what time has respected in a moment of precipitation of the type that is so frequent in the swing of the public administration?

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<sup>7</sup> El Plan General de Ordenación Urbana de Toledo (*Boletín Oficial de la Real Academia de la Historia*). Tomo CLIII, cuaderno I, pp. 121-132.

Because Toledo, in addition to other things, is still a city with clear limits, due in part to a unique topography. Cities that are limited as beautiful objects are already very rare in the world. Perhaps we can conserve in Spain, in addition to Toledo, Ávila, Segovia, Cádiz..., and who knows if any other one. Water, which is the best shield, as in Cádiz and Venice, does not prevent expansion in other cases since even rivers are now threatened.



PLAZA ISABEL II, CÁDIZ. Image: Postcard, public domain.

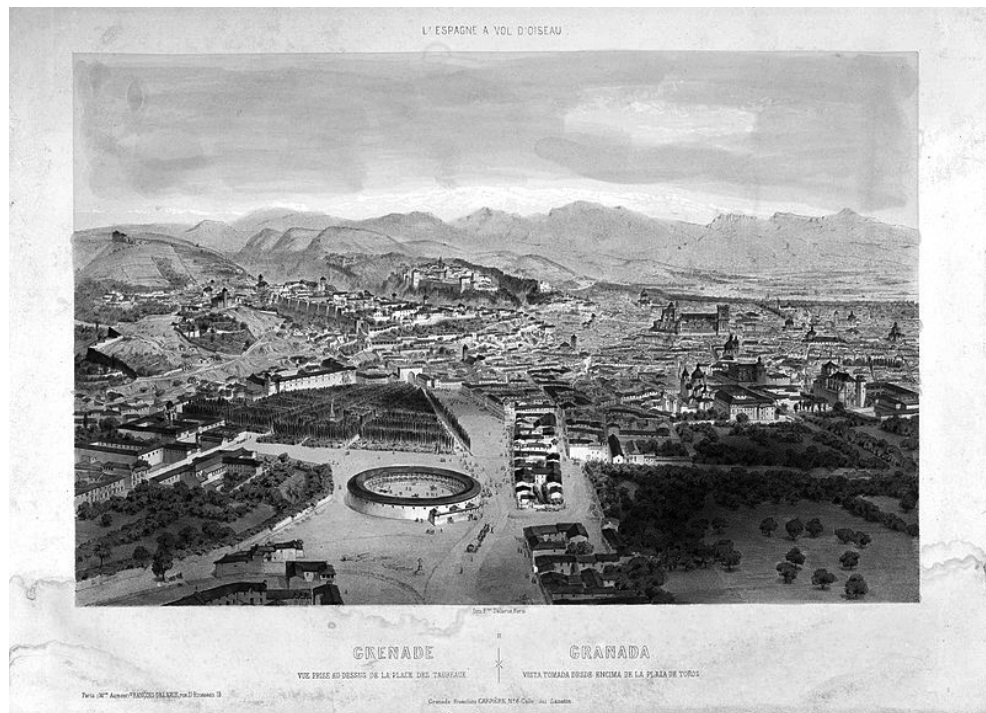
Very often, when we pass through the lower rotunda of the Prado Museum, we are absorbed in front of the beautiful landscapes painted by Peeter Snayers, illustrating the campaigns of Flanders that Archduke Leopold William of Austria led as general of the King of Spain. The complicated technique of sieges in the fields of Europe turned every city into a star. In Snayers' paintings we contemplate Breda, Ypres, Gravelinga, Bar-le-Duc, with their halos of bastions, which are like a sumptuous Baroque setting that turns the city into a true work of art. Within these ramparts, the houses are huddled together and due to their scale, the gentle Gothic *flèches* emerge between them.

In the midst of the bloody war, the fire of the bivouacs, the well-formed paintings of lansquenets or arquebusiers, the landscape could not be more cheerful and the cities, so clearly limited in the vast plains, look like gems. How different from today's industrial agglomerations, where the broken frame, sloping walls and greenish canals have been replaced by a belt of smoking factories, sheds, warehouses and sordid houses!

Without going back to the 17th century that we can contemplate in lithographs and even photographs from the last century, there are cities that still preserve a gentle containing shape and a clear definition of their limits. They are still works of art, considered as a whole. Today we can try—generally with little success—to conserve specific neighborhoods or sectors of a city, but conserving it as a whole, as a beautiful artifact in its entirety, is already an implausible pretention due to its ambition.

Among these expressive old prints, are the views of cities in a series entitled *L'Espagne à vol d'oiseau*, of which I have visited four: Seville, Córdoba, Málaga and Cádiz. They are of irreproachable fidelity. In these clear Andalusian cities, the smoke from some factory rises

timidly in the sky. However, it is still nothing more than a picturesque feature, which favors the scene such as a detached lock of hair falling on a woman's pale cheek. These prints present the entire cities, gracefully laid out on the white landscape with their architectural monuments laid in a clear hierarchy. The cathedral is always the cathedral, and before it, before its impressive mass, before its elevated tower, the other smaller churches, parishes and convents bow as they were paying homage. Public buildings have that serenity, which, perhaps as an inheritance from Rome, shone in all the symbols of the State; and the farmhouse, the white Andalusian farmhouse, was a prodigy of adjustment and discretion, of demure and intimate beauty.



ESPAGNE À VOL D'OISEAU, GRANADA. Image: Public domain.

When we see this Seville “à vol d’oiseau” so vast, so clear, so calm and complete, it seems that it extends to soak up more and more of the sky, to bend to its empire meekly. Moreover, we think of a sensitive Sevillian like Joaquín Romero y Murube, sore from the *Cielos que perdimos*, which is like grieving at the senseless transformation that our most beautiful and celebrated cities are undergoing –most of the time with no reasonable justification. Romero and Murube’s last book is another elegy, certainly heart-breaking, of the many that are reiterated on the same subject. Isn’t this unanimity moving so many sensitive spirits the start of a hopeful sign?

However, let us look back at what, in this messy essay, we have been aiming at without method, but with compassion and with the aim to clarify our distressing circumstances. We have seen that the current world, the characteristics of our civilization, lead us to this state of crisis. The man whom today prevails quantitatively, the so discussed mass-man, the one who runs desolate in a car throwing evil glances, loaded with comical and disproportionate threats, couldn’t care less about the city. What is more, he understands the city as an obstacle and sees with joy that the obstacle falls and leaves him a clear path, a path that not even he knows where it leads. This latent plebiscite, for which the majority condemns the city without knowing what it is and what it means, is the one that can end one of our most fabulous spiritual riches if we do not face it with a minoritarian, but powerful patriotic outcry.



The system to neutralize as far as possible this mass-man, poisoned by a series of myths that flash before his eyes like the glasses with which the will and wealth of savages were bought, is none other than education. The system is slow, but humanity from time immemorial has not found another. It is necessary to prepare a crusade, both nationally and locally, to awaken this noble aspiration. Everything that is done in this sense will be minor. It is necessary to call to task the most prestigious intellectuals in Spain, who have generally been sparing in the estimation of visual culture without understanding the dangers that its dullness and its progressive disappearance entail. The intellectual, absorbed by bookish and literary themes, generally remains unmoved by the growing brutality that is drying up the sources of aesthetic perception, destroying the horizon of our nearby visual world.

Gropius denounces this in the article mentioned above. "The ignorance and lack of interest in aesthetic-visual matters of the typical average citizen of the industrialized countries of the world constitute a grave obstacle for the urban planner and the architect of today, an obstacle that can only be overcome with the exercise of slow and patient education. The affirmation of common norms of value and of aesthetic judgment is the cumulative result of a slow process of education that in the course of several generations opens the mind and the sensitivity of individuals to the meaning of the form and of its force as a symbol."

Education is, for the time being, the first weapon and the constant weapon. As long as this opening of the sensitivity does not occur, we will be forced to act through coercive means, which will always be somehow sporadic and incomplete.

In any case, the first alert and the first guard to be mounted is a local guard. A kind of popular militia that defends its own heritage, that denounces infringers before all the courts of appeal, be they private or public, that violate the common heritage and to hang in the pillory of the public square, at least figuratively, all those accused of high treason. This militia must be, above all, an instrument of culture.

Because the instruments of the central power are insufficient and impotent, the most conscientious and educated citizens must undertake to safeguard their cultural values by themselves.<sup>8</sup>

I have always felt an intimate satisfaction when I have seen a nation rise in anger against those who tried to deprive them of some of their artistic wealth. Those young men with a fixed gaze under furrowed eyebrows, stationed in the town square in front of the church door, have avoided, just with their gesture, many excesses and abuses. That spirit, but increasingly cultivated and conscious, is the one that must be maintained as a living flame.

We have seen that, in the first place, the destruction of our cities happens out of ignorance and contempt. Secondly, because it is considered that the old cities are unprepared to fulfill their mission in modern life, an idea that causes us to pause once again, and that has originated those two solutions that we have recalled: the "parallax" method and the "palimpsest" method. Either we leave the old cities and build new ones, or we rewrite on the old parchment, that is, we renew the inherited city "from bottom to top" and transform

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<sup>8</sup> It is true that the Spanish State has had for a long time adequate legal instruments for the defense of those values. The goodness of the legislation is in contrast with the inefficacy that we have shown in its enforcement. The two fundamental pieces of legislation are: the *Real Decreto-Ley de 9 de agosto de 1926* and the *Ley del Patrimonio Artístico Nacional de 13 de mayo de 1933*. The latter perfects and complements the former.

it into another one. Between both solutions, there is the exceptional solution, for extreme cases, of the city-museum. We do not accept any of these solutions, and we believe we have given ample reasons for this.

The only one that we consider possible and not only for historical, sentimental and aesthetic reasons but also for practical ones, is that of conservation with a dose of transformation, greater or lesser depending on the case. In other words, applying both methods, the "parallax" and the "palimpsest," in a prudent degree and with great tact and intelligence. All cities grow to a greater or lesser degree due to parallax; that is, they all segregate suburbs or extensions which, without being another city next to the first one, function as satellites of the core. Sometimes, as it happened, for example, in Burgo de Osma, el Burgo, the suburb, acquired more importance than the original Osma hamlet. This segregation should be encouraged and promoted so that, while the core is preserved as intact as possible, the city has a suitable expansion. The method of "parallax" raises especially delicate problems in landscape-cities, in the case of Segovia or Toledo, for example, to give two typical cases. The suburb, the borough, and the satellite town must be driven through suitable terrains as an army that does not want to be seen is led through the cracks. The problem may be complex, but a solution can almost always be found. Another thing is that the solution favors or damages specific interests, and runs up against certain pressure groups. However, faced with this, we repeat, the city is not and should not be a mere economic gear. There is no option: either we save the city, limiting economic interests, isolating it from this gear, or we let it perish because we consider that its importance is less compared to these material values. But then, we should not be surprised if, from our utilitarian and mercantilist civilization, we offer new reasons for Marxists to condemn it.



CATHEDRAL, BURGO OSMA.  
*Image: Pedro Rojas, 1967.*

As for the “palimpsest” method, it cannot be entirely condemned either. The city is inevitably transformed; its fabric is renewed like the skin of saurians, but it must be done as they do it, without affecting its shape. It is logical that there are transformations that ensure and affirm the sameness of the city, the best that it is.

It is a widely held idea that ancient cities are unsuitable for modern life. Gropius himself participates in this idea. However, this seems to me a somewhat peremptory verdict. These ancient cities are, on the contrary, very sweet to live in, as long as their structure is not abused. In the first place, a city is the result of a plan and volumes, and in general, this relationship is usually very coherent. Destroying it is equivalent to breaking the urban fabric. Today the most severe damage that has been inflicted on the old complexes has consisted in altering the height in such an exaggerated proportion that in a few years, the appearance of the most beautiful Spanish cities has changed. It would be necessary to enact a general ordinance warning that in every monumental city, the height of the hamlet cannot be changed at all. The new buildings must have the height of the old ones they replace. This law can only be transgressed when circumstances allow it and only after careful examination. This is when, not only in relation to the street or immediate streets, but in relation to the general silhouette and the landscape, the variation in heights is not harmful.

These old urban centers are perfectly adaptable to current life when the uses yield to the type of building and not vice versa, as it now happens that the building has to yield to uses for which it was not intended.

Palaces and large houses can accommodate very well house organizations, corporations, public buildings, cultural centers, etcetera. The State constructs many new buildings that cease to be so after a few years, while it abandons and allows valuable old buildings to perish, even those that would have been easy to restore and would have been more solid, useful and convenient.

Many ancient noble houses can also be re-occupied by private persons capable of holding them in their former rank. Many small provincial towns suffered an exodus from their best society in the late 19th century. Still, in this century, in Segovia and in other similar cities, a small noble and aristocratic society was maintained. The attraction of Madrid put an end to these distinguished social nuclei. But then Madrid was a friendly city where “society” shone and dominated, given its structure and dimensions. So not living in Madrid was like not living. Today living in Madrid is living nowhere. The city that attracted people before is already beginning to expel them. Certain types of social life begin to be complicated. The tables are turned, and many people who seek peace, calm and beauty return to these old provincial capitals. The movement is still timid, but I am assured of a bright future in a short time if, of course, everything that the generous centuries poured out on them is not destroyed.

Therefore, let us discard this stupid idea that the old cities have become useless, and let us not follow the path of demolishers, who use this and other fallacious arguments to justify their clumsy goals.

Another enemy of the conservation of the old is usually, regrettably, the architect. The lack of culture in the architect is covered with the deceptive clothing of his creative originality. Respect, condescension towards the old is interpreted as a weakness, as a lack of convictions, as evidence of little creative energy. I realize that this statement is a little strong, but I see in this a kind of misapplied “male chauvinism” and of the worst style. No architect wants to go



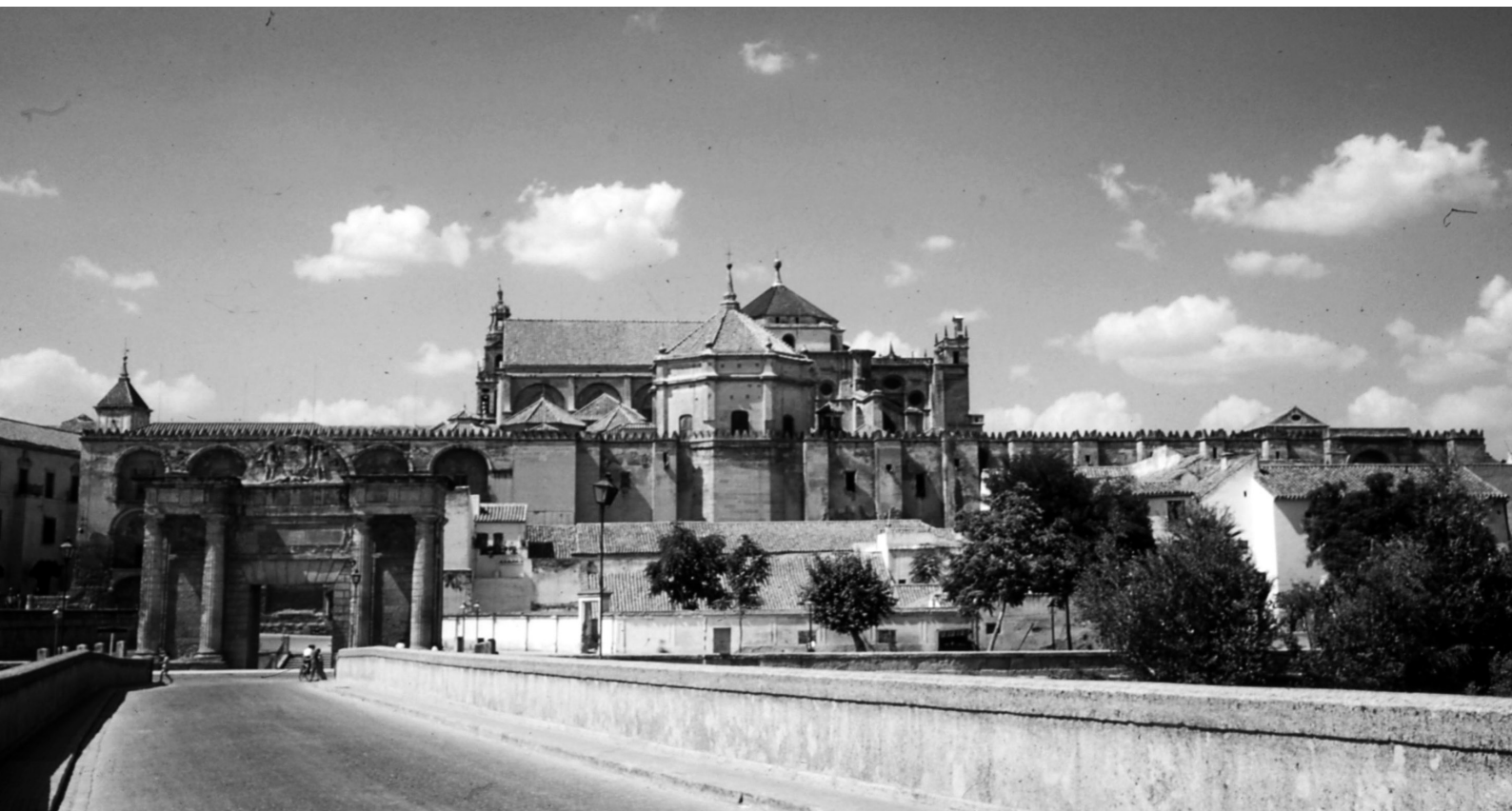
unnoticed; no one wants to appear as one more in the great orchestra; everyone wants to go to the soloists' podium and receive the conductor's handshake. Those hurtful, disproportionate, aggressive buildings that make us blush are often a source of the utmost pride for those who conceived them. Should we be surprised that these things happen?

The fact that the contemporary architect does not have an architectural culture is one of the most paradoxical facts that can occur. But that is how it is. Why? The causes are numerous, and here we are only tangentially interested; that is why we will point out some of them, albeit quickly: the first one is due to a lack of humanistic training in teaching. For many years now, the School of Architecture has been integrated into the group of Technical Schools, and this gives it character. The teaching of History is very scarce, and the teachers who cultivate it few. The students consider it as a residual subject, a memory of old times. They are blind. Today in the Faculties of Architecture worldwide, more and more importance is given to History. The second one is because the young people of the last generations have been constituted as a group of deniers: denying our past, our culture, and even our climate. As if Spain, to please them, could become a hyperborean country. These young people have idolized the great figures of the international movement, Gropius, Mies, Le Corbusier, Aalto, etcetera, and have mythologized them. They have concluded a fidelity pact with them –which on the other hand, is rabidly Iberian– and they have fulfilled it above all else. If one of these young people has to build a house in the Segovian Azoguejo, faithful to the sealed pact, he will consider himself more obliged to Mies Vander Rohe than to the Aqueduct, and he will build his iron and glass box with the faith of an enlightened person.

This spirit has even contaminated the very architects in charge of the restoration and conservation of our monuments, who sometimes feel a little ashamed of their mission and want to cover it by showing that they also know how to be modern. And they do this by being untimely and out of place. As it is, why should we be surprised by what is happening?

If the monumental and historical cities, what used to be called "Villes d'Art", are so surrounded by traps, so full of enemies who get infiltrated like a fifth column into the ranks of their guardians; if we entrust the fox to guard the chickens, how can we not be skeptical of their fate. This skepticism is not defeatism, mark my words, and if we are required to fight, let it be clear that we will do it in the front line and, if necessary, we will advocate the most daring and radical solutions, and we will defend them even if they call us delusional or retrograde; we do not care.

Great evils call for great measures. We are ready to defend, if circumstances demand it, the confiscation and alienation of all the land in our beautiful monumental cities. Do we not nationalize the railways, strategic industries, telephones, and perhaps electricity? Why is it going to be less important for the country to nationalize the land of Toledo, Salamanca, Santiago, Cáceres or Córdoba? The expropriation laws of Mendizábal were more serious, and yet they were undertaken. The State would seize the land of these populations not for the benefit of others, but for the benefit of the owners themselves, with only one condition: that if they wanted to change the existing building, either they would have to submit to whatever the city imposed on them, or they would have to renounce their contract with the State, which would take for itself the entire property of the site, applying a fair price for the expropriation. In this way, no one would be a complete owner of the land but a free tenant of the State for an indefinite period (as long as the *status quo* was not altered), and no one would have lucrative ambitions over land that did not belong to them.



CÓRDOBA. Image: Pedro Rojas, 1975.

As we have said, great evils call for great remedies, and the evil is so great that it amounts to a new loss of Spain, as the old historians called the Saracen invasion and the subsequent occupation of our land. If we lost Spain then, today we are also on the verge of losing it. This seems exaggerated, but it is actually not so. I have often thought about how I would answer someone who asked me: What is Spain? I would be in such great trouble that I would say to them: go to Toledo, Segovia, Ávila, Seville, Salamanca and Granada..., and they will provide the answer for me. If these cities disappear and stop being what they are, I would no longer know what to answer. I would stare at that person with a vague, expressionless, tired gaze that would gradually become more opaque until I sank, after some imprecise, doubtful gesture of my hands, into the depths of my memories.

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