

In and Within City-walls: *La soberronda*, the 'MidrAsh', and the Public Realm

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"Tradition must be understood as perpetual flow; being modern consists in consciously acknowledging our participation as active elements in this process"

— Ernesto Rogers,
The Experience of Architecture

In Greek mythology, the character of *Procrust* stands out for the particular way of treating his adversaries in the torture rack. If too short for the bed, he would force most enemies to stretch; if too large, he would amputate their extremities. To this day, his legend proves useful to illustrate problems akin to architectural conservation in the Caribbean. In the Antillean Region — in Procrust-like initiatives — preservation of historical buildings has challenged, when not sacrificed, the meaning of the architectural object. Recent interventions in the Southern city of Ponce, Puerto Rico prove our point: the rehabilitation of the Armstrong-Poven-tud Residence, with tin ceilings painted over arbitrarily; also a 20th-century Fox Art-Deco cinema whose entrance patio was mutilated to accommodate cheap commercial spaces. In Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, what is considered to be a pioneer intervention, in fact, froze its *Calle de las Damas* with a false monumentality which has hindered for too long any contemporary urban activity.

We are not alone in resorting to the land of Pericles in the interest of addressing the subject of architectural conservation.¹ Spanish critic Antón Capitel has already appropriated *The Odyssey* for articulating his own points of view in the essay *El tapiz de Penélope*. In the classic text, the wife of the hero was required to accept one of her many suitors upon finishing the tapestry she seemed to have been working at forever. Penelope would weave incessantly during the day; but undo her work at night, trusting in the return of her loved one.

Through the myth, Capitel reminds us preservation knows no end... and acknowledges many beginnings. Interventions succeed one another, hurting or invigorating themselves. Why should preservation dismantle such a layering of experiences? For Capitel, when conservation nullifies the multi-temporality of the historic monument, it simultaneously obscures the value represented by its extended life throughout time.² In contrast, Procrust's torture rack seems today a more powerful image (less obliging than that of an abnegated Penelope) to illustrate the interpretative arbitrariness that weighs down most preservation efforts in Puerto Rico.

Exceptions? Sure, there are. Criticism, after all, is the product of previous experiences that enable us to understand that things can always be better. And various examples today point to a newly-extended reach of conservation in Puerto Rico, now more than ever concerned with the preservation of the public realm. Among distinguished initiatives are: the rehabilitation of the cemetery steps in Mayagüez; the insertion of a parking building within Ponce's traditional urban fabric; and the restoration of a 19th-century lighthouse enriched by contemporary additions. The good examples, however, do not seem to be enough. Mistrust still permeates any attempt at incorporating contemporary vocabularies within historic contexts. Why is it so?

An examination of preservation efforts in the Island may help to ascertain the situation. During the late fifties, Spanish-colonial architecture in Puerto Rico became the cultural icon with which to oppose Progress and Modernity, as "imported" from Mainland USA. New meant evil, and as such was banned. As a result, today we enjoy Old San Juan as one of the best preserved cities in America. On the other hand, *fossilization* prevails. No serious proposal, for example, has

recently addressed the enhancement of the public realm as integral to its walled system.

Christine Boyer has already warned about the “counter effects” of preservation initiatives in the city.³ In Old San Juan, the notion of *fait accompli* prevails: in over ten years, no serious proposal has addressed the main issues currently at stake in the historic center. Among these, one emerges as a key priority: the enhancement of the public realm. In a city over 500 years old like San Juan, open spaces have yet to realize their full potential. We do not refer just to traditional parks and plazas, to which much attention has been bestowed throughout the years. In contrast, we address here issues of *circuits, sequences, and linkages* relevant to colonial cities today, as best expounded by their many encircling fortifications.

The task is made difficult—not only by those who argue against historic centers as priorities—but also by current arguments regarding their uselessness. At Rice University in 1991, Rem Koolhaas argued: ...“we seem to be stuck with the idea of street and plaza as representative of the public realm... while the arrival of TV, media, and other related inventions, have all but erased it.”⁴ However, recent social preferences for leisure and recreational activities more than endorse the (re)activation of the public realm in urban centers:

The hearth of the city should be the most logical place to house human acts: conversation, discussion, flirting, shopping, le flâneur, and the invaluable dolce far niente which, in its best sense, addresses the most natural expression of contemplation (leisure as the enjoyment of both body and spirit).⁵

Rogers’ vision might seem outdated and too nostalgic, but cities in Latin America and the Caribbean continue to attest these convictions of the renowned Italian critic. The (re)use of the public realm—in contrast with what Koolhaas could argue—remains the most potential tool for a truly democratic redevelopment in this side of the world. To this day, Havana’s plazas, parks, *paseos*, *alamedas* and arcades remain integral to the experience of the Cuban capital. In Central America, Antigua Guatemala shelters spaces of myriad activity: peddlers, passers-by and laundresses, all meet at *Plaza de la Unión*, social melting pot as not many cities can claim. Caracas and Buenos Aires, most recently, have revalidated notions of the urban context as public theatre and stage for human behavior. Life in the city has always implied spaces in which both the inconsequence and the drama of life become evident.

However, and in spite of our familiarity with such an understanding, Puerto Rico’s main historic center, Old San Juan, has yet to come to terms with the full potential of the public realm. The product of much effort and the object of much praise, *preservation*—in this century’s old city—has yet to fulfill much of its potential. Rescuing individual buildings has clouded the attention to public space. Plazas and parks have been tended to, sure, but not so spaces where congregation and activity can be further fostered; these remain largely ignored. Remnant areas within a historic center do not seem, at first instance, to be an important issue. That is precisely why attention must be granted to them.

In many cities, *History* (and historical meaning) have by now “frozen” segments of the urban fabric: so-called *historic* or *landmark* designations have failed at articulating their meaning to the public. Fortifications still extant in many colonial centers of Latin America best exemplify this condition. Admired as “mute witnesses”, so far they fail at establishing any dialogue of interest with those who approach them. Lack of recognition of the civic potential of walled spaces constitutes one of the region’s most important urban omissions. In Cuba, Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, disengagement has led preservationists to ignore many areas within important cities which, in fact, enjoy spatial definition by a “baluarte”, an “hornabeque” and many ramparts. In contrast, current efforts at other places stimulate to reconceptualize this condition. Among these, Cartagena de Indias in Colombia, but also Avila, Cáceres, Gerona and Toledo in Spain merit examination.

At Cartagena, fortifications are made permeable and inhabitable by ramps, stairs, bridges and multiple connections which allow for the enjoyment of different recreational programs as one travels the full extension of the walls, under, over and inside them. In Avila (two hours away from Madrid) a recent preservation project now allows visitors to complete the full circuit that guards used to traverse during medieval times, from a high point above. Known as “la soberronda”, the route ensured protection of the city at all times. To allow tourists to reach Toledo’s high area easily, architects José Martínez-Lapeña and Elías Torres-Tur devised a group of mechanical escalators as balconies carved out from the rock, with a full view of the surrounding context. Visitors do not cease to praise the solution.

Nonetheless, these examples from Colombia and Spain know no paragon in the Antillean Region where, ironically, the most extended wall system ever was built. In a sense, this lack of recognition of the civic potential of walls and the spaces they comprise constitutes one of

the region's most important urban omissions to date. This condition is acknowledged as an **architectural midrAsh**. The Hebrew term *midrAsh* alludes to the *lacunæ* evident in ecclesiastical writings, including the Bible, customarily underlining a chronological void for which precise information is uncertain. Throughout time, exegesis has granted myriad (re)interpretations to these temporal gaps. City walls, once devoided of their inert, neutral character, can be visualized as a fertile element, capable of promoting the multi-temporal appreciation of the contemporary urban condition. Their "voids" can also be filled. Thus, fortifications can transcend their own inherent reference to the past and acquire present relevance as integral to the experience of the city today.

To this day in the Caribbean, forts and castles constitute the region's single effort at monumentality.⁶ Once their military purpose ceased to be, many remained in place, while others could only be partially demolished. As such, many have remained a presence without meaning in the city. To that effect, we have been promoting (both in academia and the professional world) experimentation related to this unique built heritage, one still in search of a spatial "translator" capable of articulating its dynamic potential.

A trip to Pamplona, North of Spain, generated initial enthusiasm on the topic. Fortified constructions in said city already constitute a significant seed in need of the proper stimulus to grow and bloom beyond mere built heritage. On one hand, Spain's leadership role in conservation is acknowledged throughout the world. On the other, many of the country's efforts are understood as paragon in the Americas. Among distinguished leading examples, one could include Dionisio Hernández-Gil for his recuperation of Diana's Roman Temple in Mérida; Lluís Clotet and Oscar Tusquets for their project for the *Palau de la Música Catalana* in Barcelona; and Giorgio Grassi's *Teatro de Sangunto* in Valencia. Practical and theoretical concerns go hand in hand in most preservation projects in Iberia.

Projects in Spain acknowledge the public realm not only in terms of its historic but also multitemporal continuity.⁷ In parallel, Pamplona reflects growth patterns comparable to those of the most characteristic Caribbean cities. Such analogies led us to experiment with the preservation of walled spaces under conservation optics which are not foreign to the Spanish experience. The validation of ideas within a metropolitan milieu, more than often, has proven catalytic for developing awareness in so-called peripheral contexts, like Latin America and the Caribbean many times feel to be. This leads us back to Pamplona.



Fig. 1. Pamplona, Spain, became the testing ground to explore the recreational potential inherent to fortifications as spaces of leisure, around, above, and within them.

The city famous for encouraging bulls to race after people rises over a plateau, around 40 meters above the river that surrounds it. Since its early times, it constituted an ideal site for defense. Modern developments, however, lie at the foot of the platform and disconnected from the old core. Visual continuity between high and low contexts still nurtures the possibility of a future connection between both levels. We deemed appropriate to articulate this condition through the manipulation of the area's neighboring walls to underline their potential as public realm. The specific site chosen for design demonstration purposes appears as a nondescript place to any foreigner. In fact, most of it is occupied by a 1970's plaza, which never succeeded at performing as such. Cars park now over it, in spite of enjoying an ample view of the river and housing developments below.

Government offices, a museum and new archives (designed by Rafael Moneo) border the site. To the Northwest, a small area claims attention yearly, as the starting-gate space from which Pamplona's famous bulls begin their race to honor *San Fermín* in July. Important for historic and mnemonic reasons, this sector known as *Los Corralillos* fails to be effectively connected to the center of town. Inhabitants in the lower parts of the city go daily by it in what constitutes for many an arduous walk up. The presence of the wall—its scale, tectonics, and extension—further underlines the separation between old and new urban contexts.

Not unaware of the situation, the municipality is encouraging projects that explore viable alternatives to foster connections. To that effect, an extended roster of architects was called upon to submit proposals, among



Fig. 2. A rampart overlooking the Arga River—adjacent to where San Fermín festivities begin each year—is occupied by a sports and recreation complex cut into the ground.

these: Tuñón + Mansilla; Francisco Javier Mangado; and Machado y Silvetti. Our proposal incorporates the city's will to link its many open spaces, urban connections, and underground parking areas into a civic circuit. The site next to *Los Corralillos* seemed ideal to validate our interest in expounding the potential of fortifications to house, enclose, support, expose, and celebrate contemporary civic life.

Pamplona constituted a rich canvas for analysis, exploration and design recommendations. In our proposal for the city's redevelopment, a rampart overlooking the Arga River—adjacent to where San Fermín festivities begin each year—is occupied by a sports and recreation complex cut into the ground. The program fulfills municipal requirements to provide communal facilities for all city neighborhoods, to this day lacking in the historic center of Pamplona. Basketball courts and swimming pools more than often establish a scale usually difficult to integrate within a pre-existing medieval texture. A multilayered design solution strengthens pedestrian connections in the city towards *Barrio La Rochapea*, beyond the Arga River. Architects and municipal officers from Pamplona assisted in the identification of program uses: courts, pools, lockers and showers, eating facilities, a bar, meeting rooms, and a cinema. As a complement, a rowing outhouse extends from the existing wall unto the river edge across.

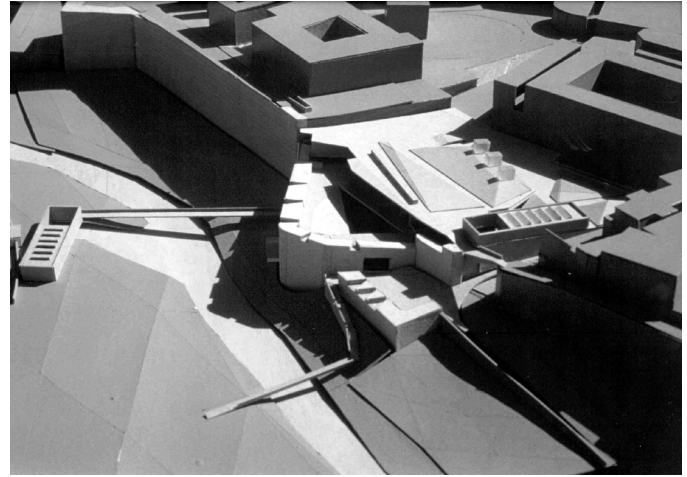


Fig. 3. A multilayered design solution strengthens pedestrian connections in the city towards Barrio La Rochapea (at left), beyond the Arga River.

The open space above—an urban balcony—is woven into the city's pedestrian and vehicular links, profiting from adjacent (and available) parking facilities. The historic walls remain the public presence, while the new building only becomes evident as such from the inside and walking along the ramparts. Concrete and steel construction were manipulated in the interest of granting a lightweight appearance to the complex, further underlined by the use of perforations and glass, also by the provision of green-roof technologies.

Fortifications at Pamplona, once their defensive purposes expired, allowed new urban sprawl outside the walled system. A hundred years after, it becomes once again pertinent to examine the relation between historic center, walls and suburbia to establish more viable and renewed readings of the public realm based on a dynamic interpretation of the historic fortifications. In the day to day task in the Caribbean, until now, that challenge constitutes an inexpugnable urban/biblical *midrAsh*.

Other cities around the globe, as we have already mentioned, respond to that matter. There's no doubt that the spatial relation between historic and modern city in Cartagena de Indias owes much of its sense to the dynamic occupation of its walls. Toledo (with a topographic condition similar to Pamplona's), now ties its historic center to its immediate context by the insertion of mechanical escalators; up and down becoming one. If several examples can be pointed out, then the possibilities must be even greater.

City walls are capable of promoting a multi-temporal appreciation of the contemporary urban condition. To that effect, we have been promoting experimentation

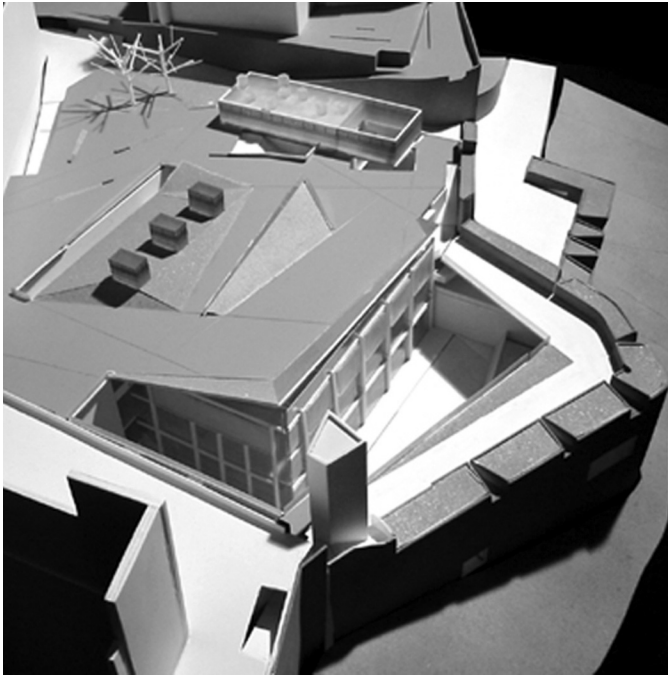


Fig. 4. The open space above—an urban balcony—is woven into the city's pedestrian and vehicular links. The historic wall remains a public presence, while the new building only becomes evident as such from the inside.

with this unique built heritage, still in search of a spatial "translator" capable of articulating its dynamic potential. A site in Pamplona, Spain, has been identified as an ideal urban "living room" for elucidating the potential of fortifications to house and celebrate contemporary civic life. If the monumentality of the walls once made Caribbean architecture proud, today the idea of domesticating their scale seems even more pertinent ... shying away from what Procrust would probably have chosen to do.

NOTES

¹ To avoid the repetition of terms, we do not indulge in semantic differentiations of concepts like *rehabilitation*, *restoration*, *preservation* and *conservation*, even though they stand for different types of valorizations.

² In his essay collection *Metamorfosis de monumentos y teorías de la restauración* (1999), Capitel validates the multiple elements that have a bearing in a historic structure. The characteristics and properties of the monument to be restored lead the architect to the theoretical stance most pertinent to the problem. M. Christine Boyer in *The City of Collective Memory: Its Historical Imagery and*

Architectural Entertainments (1994), on the other side, endorses the establishment of a clarifying scheme to demonstrate the evolution of historical buildings in order to identify the set of rules more appropriate to the intervention.

³ M. Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory: Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1994). p. 385

⁴ Sanford Kwinter, *Rem Koolhaas: Conversation with Students* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996). p. 45

⁵ Ernesto N. Rogers, *La experiencia de la arquitectura* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Nueva Visión, n.d.) p. 110. *Piropeo* is synonym of a way of walking in Spain, and *flâner* (in French) means, walking around without any previous objective.

⁶ Jorge Rigau, "The Stevenson Screen: Safety Islands for Globalization", *Lecture at Cornell University*, not published (1999).

⁷ Antón Capitel, *Metamorfosis de monumentos y teorías de la restauración* (S.A., Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1999).

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The Public Face of Modern Architecture and Urban Space

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LOOKING THROUGH MID-CENTURY CIVIC ARCHITECTURE AND URBANISM TO THE PRESENT

In the tradition of architecture with a civic function, this paper examines the phenomenon of the political face of a building through a series of examples of public buildings and adjoining urban public spaces. These examples generate questions about how and whether architectural design and its arrangement of public space accommodate discursive and demonstrative civic life. The examples range from the modern canon such as the Civil Government Edifice in Tarragona, Spain by Alejandro de la Sota, to a theoretical proposition made in 1965 by Cedric Price for a Pop-up Parliament for London. The architectural scale ranges from the urbanity of an intimate Georgian, scale as exemplified by the American Embassy on Grosvenor Square in London, designed in 1955-61, by Eero Saarinen, to buildings designed as icons on a planetary scale, such as the United Nations building in Manhattan or Breuer's UNESCO in Paris. In contrast with the modern past, lately models for building with a public, political vocation seem to derive from the bastion. Recent architectural reporting describes American embassy buildings, for example the new 'Standard Embassy Design' prototype, as regularized fortresses with 9 foot high anti-ram perimeter walls, and protective devices such as car-chewing metal teeth which emerge from the ground.¹

If Cedric Price's Pop-up Parliament project of 1965 can be identified as the ultimate proposal for a transparent, accessible, mass public political architecture, it is because of its intention to accommodate the greatest numbers of participants in the democratic process. His Pop-up Parliament for London was conceived as a polemical project, published in the weekly journal *New Society*. In the project, a series of temporary and

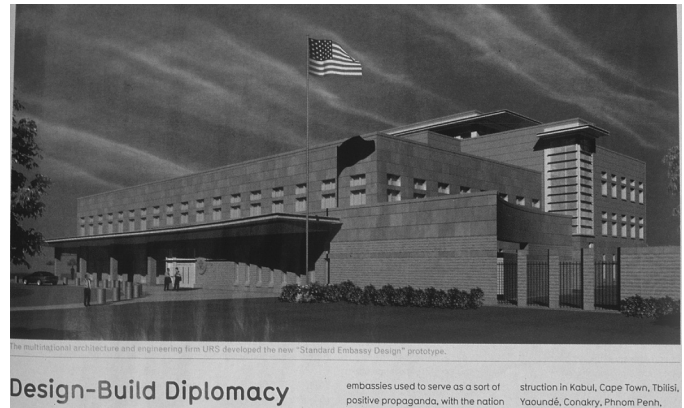


Fig. 2. "Standard Embassy Design" prototype, designed by URS Architecture and Engineering Firm, illustrating Bradford McKee's report, 'Design-Build Diplomacy', *Architecture* Jan. 2003 vol. 92, no. 1, p 45-6

permanent spaces of indoor and outdoor assembly proposed drastic change, replacing the existing Parliament Buildings with an vast public forum, electronically serviced. The proposal was defined with a great public square allowing thousands to assemble. Moving sidewalks, heliports, flexible spaces, elements such as debating platforms, would permit a constantly flowing and adapting architectural and urban environment. In contrast, or perhaps in fundamental continuity with Price's radical thinking, much of the innovation in terms of furthering political discussion has taken place on the virtual front in the last decade with grass-roots and official organizing fostered by internet connecting. An accompanying phenomenon was the web-organized political demonstration. The large-scale mass demonstration, as exemplified by the confrontational protests in Seattle, Quebec City, and Genoa, Italy in the last few years has surged and waned, and the political usefulness of the phenomenon is still subject of debate. In the aftermath of 9-11, and in the context of issues