

**An inflection
in Spanish post-Civil War architecture**

Luxury flats. Madrid 1955 - 1970

PhD

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1. Julio Cebrián, *El Alcazar* newspaper, February 17th, 1967.
2. *Torre de Valencia*, Madrid. Javier Carvajal Ferrer.
3. *Torres Blancas*, Madrid. Francisco Javier Sáenz de Oiza.
4. *Girasol building*, Madrid. José Antonio Coderch, Manuel Valls.

...he rejoiced to think that something was still
beyond reach of modern men's voracity...

Vicente Blasco Ibáñez. *Cañas y barro*.

Throughout twentieth century Madrid suffered important urban transformations. The historical area was completed, the expansion area of the city was built and the outskirts were colonized. Luxury housing as a *part* played an important role in the construction of the city, in form of palaces, small palaces and *hotels* during the first quarter, mainly as terraced buildings until the sixties, and afterwards as isolated buildings, broken all the links with the preexisting city. Although the incorporation of the Modern Movement was done through paths more suitable to its interests, luxury housing soon appeared as one of the architectural experimentation fields. The range of the briefs, the privileged urban situation in which the buildings were sited, and the less impact of the economic constraints allowed architects to design with a personal approach buildings in which the interim period between the project and the construction did not alter the initial idea: luxury housing made the *new* dreamt images possible.

Spanish Civil war interrupted a phenomenon that had happened in other European countries: the nobility's loss of power in favour of an industrial *bourgeoisie*. But this nobility remained with less power and richness, due to the war. In order to escape from the horrors of war, the *elite* tried to configure a new reality. This explains why a hungry country, with a high proportion of illiteracy and an important part of its population living in bad conditions subsidized the construction of flats that were enjoyed by well-off families. The necessity to boost economy, a consequence of the ideas incorporated with the 1959 Spanish Stabilization Plan, represents an economic interpretation that has to be considered along with the previous sociological view.

This type of houses had a considerable impact on society, not only because the peak of its development took place during this period: the lack of houses for the low class people contrasts with the abundance of luxury flats. This situation appears on the newspaper's editorials, in which journalism expressed their criticism towards the ironic situation of the housing sector.

Madrid luxury housing had an impact on the housing built in the rest of Spain. Besides some isolated names, only Barcelona had a similar number of prominent architects and a structure resistant to Madrid's influence. The architects that studied in Madrid not only built there; they also built the most brilliant examples of luxury flats in the rest of the Spanish cities. Luis Gutiérrez Soto in Valencia and Sevilla, Alejandro de la Sota in Pontevedra, Juan Daniel Fullaondo and Rafael Aburto in Bilbao, Javier Carvajal in León and Marbella, Rafael de la Hoz in Córdoba, José García de Paredes in Granada or Antonio Lamela in Valladolid and Marbella. Manuel Trillo de Leyva and OTAISA in Sevilla, Juan Antonio García Solera in Valencia, Fernando Redón in Oviedo or Luis Peña Ganchegui in San Sebastián represent some of the few examples of good architects linked to other cities, where they completed interesting buildings. This was a probable consequence of Franco's Regime inclination to develop Madrid.

The relevance of this group on the Spanish general architectural situation was bigger than the influence it had on the rest of Europe. European countries, in general, focused on reconstruction. The impact that some of these buildings –especially *Torres Blancas*, the *torre de Valencia* and the Girasol building– had in Spanish architecture seems hard to deny. These three examples had far-reaching effects on the architectural debate, something that was not caused by their virtues as houses. Nor does this mean that these three were the only exceptional buildings. The studied proposals show the stylistic differences that emerged on the fifties decade. These works illustrate the wide range of references and interests for which Madrid's School of Architecture has been traditionally known. In this School studied architects as diverse as Antonio Lamela or Fernando Higuera.

The capacity of most of the studied architects to change the likes of the society is also worth mentioning. Some of them, like Corrales, Molezún, Cano Lasso, Carvajal and García de Castro, persuaded real estate developers with modern architecture, incorporating the Modern Movement

5. Flats in Balbina Valverde St., Madrid. José Antonio Corrales, Ramón Vázquez Molezún. Third floor plan. *Author's drawing.*

6. Flats in Balbina Valverde St., Madrid. José Antonio Corrales, Ramón Vázquez Molezún. View of the living room from the dining room. *Author's picture.*



5



as an added value of the developments. Higuera, Miró or Juan de Haro were able to convince the military and the elite of the Regime public workers to build *modern* proposals. Others, like Lamela or Ruiz de la Prada, went even further and risked their resources as entrepreneurs. All of them showed a strong belief in the architecture they were building. The residential production of these architects represents an important part of the best architectural examples of this period, either by a new house organization, outstanding spatial proposal, resolution of the contact between the city and the building, or the thoughtful incorporation of new materials and construction systems. All these characteristics were more important than the mere real estate profits.

Luxury housing was one of the ways in which an inflection in Spanish post Civil War's architecture developed. The traditional and populist architecture promoted by Franco's Regime during the forties and until the mid fifties, with examples as the "agricultural fair", started then to share its major role with *modern* proposals. Although the official preferences for academic architecture persisted, as shows the result of the Monument for Calvo Sotelo's competition, the change in the tendency appears clear. Being less linked to a *historic* image than other typologies, commerce allowed society the possibility of experiencing *modern* qualities, such as transparency or electric illumination, qualities appreciated because they meant *progress*. Almost at the same time luxury housing, free from official pressures, allowed Modern Movement's consolidation. On a period defined by a remarkable real estate development, these *new* qualities became a differentiation sign against the forties' proposals. These *new* qualities, wrapped inside the words *luxury* and *luxurious*, became a commercial lure that persuaded the sixties' *elite*. These *elite*'s requirements for non typical briefs found a heterogeneous professional response that achieved a remarkable level in some architects. In this economic context this inflection also represents a kind of paradox that inevitably changes the Modern Movement's social service approach.

Two aspects must be emphasized regarding the relationship with the urban environment. The collective use spaces' usual disposition on the exterior facades allows more freedom for the resolution of the contact. Abundance of means facilitates the creation of a filter, a diaphragm that can appear in many different ways, most of the time as a terrace. The attention to the urban environment qualities does not imply a literal response. When the building is not placed in an autonomous way, the integration strategies trust the use of traditional construction materials. The second important aspect is the relation with the existing buildings. Many of the proposals studied here replaced an existing heritage built during nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth. Buildings of Saldaña, Sallaberry, Espelius or Mathet were demolished without remorse, something that meant the disappearance of an interesting architectural heritage, replaced by another with similar or higher interest. The only objective piece of information is the increase of the built area that this change represented. Qualitatively this change resulted in a decent architectural heritage that solved its time's necessities, something that the removed palaces did not fulfil. A good example of this fact is Ruiz de la Prada's building in Martínez Campos and Zurbano, which substituted a Joaquín Saldaña's mid twenties *hotel*. Conserving the existing heritage would have meant extending Madrid to the outskirts, and neither the society nor urbanism –*the ever late discipline*– were ready for that. Although a judgement on the transformation that took place on these areas of Madrid requires a broader study, it is convenient to avoid nostalgia in order to estimate fairly the studied architects' work. These architects, as Sáenz de Oíza said, *took away one edifice to build another of higher architectural quality*. If during the sixties few buildings escaped in Madrid from the *modern men's voracity*, the city at least will have the consolation of knowing that some of these architects were sensible enough to build an appropriate response to the demands of a developing country. These modern men designed buildings that raise a mixture of admiration and nostalgia among today's architects, buildings that show the valuable lesson of a properly done work, a legacy of a particular way of working.