

TECHNICAL REVIEW 1983

Cristo de la Luz (Bab-al-Mardum Mosque), Toledo
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Three urban improvement projects in the historic city of Toledo, involving important remains from the period of Arab occupation.

I. Objectives

To rehabilitate three different parts of the old city containing important remains from the Arab period, including an Umayyad Mosque and two of the Gateways in the Arab fortifications.

To create pleasant open spaces close to the congested centre of the city for public recreation, with improved paving, lighting and landscaping.

To preserve important parts of the Islamic heritage in Spain.

Preliminary Note

All three projects are copiously documented and described as having been executed within given dates and given budgets. In fact, as inspection of the sites revealed and subsequent interviews with the former Director General of Fine Arts and the current Head of the Historic Towns Section at the Ministry of Culture confirmed, they were not conceived as distinct and coherent projects, nor were they executed in the manner described. On the contrary, individual and sometimes very minor improvements ('actuaciones puntuales') were executed piecemeal over a number of years, without proper research or documentation and sometimes without attacking the fundamental problems present. What is more some of the things described as having been done have patently not been done, although there may be an intention to do them in years to come.

The "budget" figures must therefore be taken to represent the cumulative cost of undertaking these improvements to date.

INTRODUCTION

Toledo is one of the most important cities in Spain, from an historical, artistic or architectural point of view. Some 60 kms. South-West of Madrid, it stands out on a granite outcrop, almost encircled by a steep ravine in which the green waters of the River Tagus flow. The Romans appear to have been the first to appreciate its strategic location, for they founded the city of Toletum there and built the first fortifications. Toledo was the capital of the Spanish Visigothic kingdom from 554 AD until the Moorish conquest in 711 AD. The Old City still shelters behind the ramparts which were built, on Roman ruins, by King Wamba the Goth and then strengthened and enlarged by Arabs and Christians alike.

For three centuries Toledo was incorporated into the Emirate of Cordova only regaining its independence in 1012 AD after the revolt of the taifas. Recaptured by the Christians in 1085 AD it soon became the capital of Castile, and remained so until the capital was moved to Madrid by Philip II in 1561, leaving Toledo as the spiritual centre, seat of the Roman Catholic primacy of Spain.

In cultural terms, Toledo's most brilliant period was in the Middle Ages, when the civilisations of East and West - Moorish, Jewish and Christian - coexisted there, to produce the distinctive Mudéjar style of art and architecture, in which the dominant influence remains Islamic.

There are in fact relatively few authentic remains of the Umayyad, rather than Mudéjar, period in Toledo. Of these the most important is probably the Bab-al-Mardum Mosque, or Cristo de la Luz.

Today, Toledo is the provincial and regional capital, with a population of 52,988 and a thriving tourist trade.

Standing on the central plateau of Spain, the Meseta, at an altitude of 529 m., Toledo has a harsh continental climate. The mean temperatures range from 4°C in January to 27°C in July, with extremes of -10°C in winter and 42°C in summer.

CRISTO DE LA LUZ

The Ermita del Cristo de la Luz, or Bab-al-Mardum Mosque, lies just inside the line of the Visigothic Walls. The site, with an area of some 3,000 sq. m., is bounded by two gateways: the Puerta del Sol, a Mudéjar fortification of the 14th Century with twin towers, and the smaller Arco del Cristo, dating probably from the Visigothic era. Between these two gates an esplanade dominates the lower town and gives admirable views of the countryside beyond.

The Bab-al-Mardum Mosque dates from the year 1,000 AD, according to the foundation inscription on the facade. It was converted into a Church after the Christian conquest, and a brick apse was added later in the Mudéjar style. The original rectangular, almost square, Mosque survives intact, except for the qibla wall, now replaced by a doorway. It is constructed in baked brick, stone and plaster. There were probably three entrances in each of the other walls, although those flanking the mihrab are now

sealed. The surviving Umayyad entrances have horse-shoe or lobed arches, and the West facade carries blind intersecting horseshoe arches and blind arcading in two registers - all details which form part of the decorative repertoire of Umayyad Cordova. Nine small domes rest inside on borrowed Visigothic columns, and the rib patterns of the domes are coarser versions of the more elegant domes in front of the mihrab of the Great Mosque in Cordova.

The Mosque underwent a fairly thorough restoration in 1909, and photogrammetric surveys have been made recently by the Instituto Arqueologico Aleman (German Archaeological Institute), Madrid.

The project consisted principally in opening up access to the esplanade, grading and planting the immediate surroundings of the Mosque and establishing a garden on the terrace between the two. New retaining walls and railings were created along the street, and new access steps to the esplanade beside the Arco del Cristo. The garden is a quincunx with a small fountain in the middle and a large semicircular basin against the East wall of the garden.

Two parasitic buildings were demolished: the guardian's house, which blocked the view over the ramparts, and a lean-to structure immediately behind the Mosque.

On the far side of the garden there is access to the upper storeys of the Puerta del Sol, which have been recently cleaned up and repointed. A project to create a link with the residential quarter on the hill behind the Puerta del Sol is in a half-finished state, with a newly paved alleyway leading to a locked gate in some railings, with waste land and rubbish beyond.

Despite what is said in the Nomination, the Mosque itself has not been restored, beyond a small amount of repointing and repair of the roof. There is no evidence of consolidation of the South-west corner of the Mosque, and the Architect's answers on this (as on many other) points were evasive.

Construction Schedule and Costs

The project was executed between 1971 and 1974, for a total cost of Ptas. 15.9 million (US\$ 120,000). Labour costs and materials each accounted for 44% of the total. The Municipal Council of Toledo provided 20% of the finance, the balance coming from national sources. Labour was local.

Project Significance

The project resulted in a definite improvement in the amenities of the surrounding area, as well as giving access to an admirable view-point. It has also provided a worthy setting for an interesting specimen of Islamic architecture. The garden is well planned and well maintained.

The Bab-al-Mardum is certainly the most important Umayyad remains in Toledo. It is of national importance, but by no means unique, nor is it the most distinguished representative of its type. Its restoration should be undertaken as soon as possible: the mediaeval wall-paintings in the apse are gravely at risk and in very bad condition already.

The project is notable for the quality and appropriateness of the materials used - red brick, cobblestones and granite kerbs, sand/lime mortar, wrought iron railings. Indeed, this is a constant and welcome feature of all rehabilitation work in Toledo.

The Puerta Antigua de Bisagra was erected during the Arab fortification of Toledo in the 9th Century, and it was through this gate that Alfonso VI entered Toledo as a conqueror in 1085 AD. Another, larger gateway, known as the Bisagra Nueva, was built about 100 m. away in the 15th Century, to act as the main ceremonial entrance from Madrid and the North.

On either side of the Antigua Bisagra, the Arab ramparts have survived intact, and the space in front of them was cleared in the early years of this century. At the same time the main road to the South was made to by-pass the Old City and a Boulevard was constructed, several metres above the ground level, at the foot of the walls.

Just behind the two Bisagras stands a distinguished mudejar monument, the Church of Santiago del Arrabal. It has a free-standing bell-tower which is almost certainly built up on the remnants of an earlier minaret. The interior of the Church was well restored not long ago, but the West Front was masked by an undistinguished presbytery built up against it.

The first phase of the project was to demolish all the houses which backed against the ramparts between the two gates, to a depth of about 5 or 6 metres. A paved walk was then created along the inside of the ramparts, and those houses which had suffered partial demolition only were given new facades or reconstructed in a traditional manner. In one case a small internal courtyard has been turned into an outside patio.

The new walk runs across the bottom of the old narrow passageway which led to the Bisagra Antigua to a paved open space beyond the gate, in which a concrete sculpture by Eduardo Chillida has been placed. The walk is slightly curved and slopes downhill towards the Bisagra Antigua. A fig-tree has been planted half way along it. The inner face of the walls has been made good.

The next phase consisted in the demolition of the presbytery and the paving of the terrace outside the West Front of the Church. The facade of the Church was made good.

Finally, the main road outside the gate having been realigned, it was possible to remove the earth which had been piled up against the lower part of the ramparts and restore them to their original dimensions.

The buildings affected by the project were all residential; of the fifteen families who used to live there, 8 remain, 2 accepted financial compensation and five were offered alternative accommodation at public expense. The displaced presbytery is now housed in one of the empty buildings.

The Puerta Antigua de Bisagra has not been restored or repaired

Construction Schedule and Costs

The works in the quarter continued for nearly ten years, from October 1971 to July 1981. The initial budget was Ptas. 27, 500, 000 (\$206,250). Total costs were in the end 17% more than this, at \$241,825. Just over half of the total was labour, 39% materials, 7% earthmoving and 3% professional fees. 10% of the total came from private sources, 35% from local funds and 55% from national.

Project significance

The restoration of the Church of Santiago del Arrabal lies outside the scope of this report, but it is certainly one of the most important mudejar buildings in the city, the restoration seems to have been conscientiously done and a number of interesting features have been revealed.

The recreation, at considerable expense, of a chemin de ronde between the two gates is a more questionable enterprise. First, it is not known what, if any, access there was to the ramparts at this point - as a restoration it is therefore hypothetical. As a piece of urban improvement it is not an obvious priority: the insalubrity of the houses which have been cleared could no doubt have been dealt with in other ways; and it is (rightly) no longer de rigueur to disengage every major monument from its connective tissue (the more modest buildings which abut it). From the point of view of the local community or the visitor other priorities might have included better landscaping outside the ramparts. If the intention was to do justice to a distinguished piece of Islamic military architecture, it might have been better to repair the Bisagra Antigua and to open it to public access.

The realignment of the main road is undoubtedly a gain, but that too is outside the scope of this report.

ALCANTARA BRIDGE AND GATE

The Alcantara bridge was first constructed in 866 AD, close to the ruins of a Roman bridge. The Arab bridge was in turn washed away, except for the piers and abutments, in 1257 and reconstructed by Alfonso X. There were further restorations in the 15th and 16th Centuries. The masonry of the bridge contains stones of Roman, Visigothic and Arab origin, as do the nearby walls. The massive tower guarding the West end of the bridge is mudejar work. The gate beyond was undoubtedly one of the oldest entries to the city, for the Roman Toletum, and subsequently the Visigothic Palace of Galiana and the Arab Medina crowned the slope behind it. It had however been blocked by a toll-keepers cottage and when it fell into disuse another set of steps leading up the outside of the walls took its place. The old sunken passageway was used as a tip, and when the restoration was decided it was entirely full of refuse.

Rehabilitation and landscaping

On removing the fill it was found that the archways and retaining walls of the entrance, with its typical chicane, were still in a sound state. It was also decided to create a new way up to the town above, which would supersede the steep and tiring stairway outside the ramparts. Both retaining walls for the new route were still in existence and all that was needed was to consolidate them and build the lower one up with granite blocks found in situ. Suitable paving and lighting were

installed and a new access to the city from the Alcantara Bridge had been created.

At the top of this, where the new path reaches the level of an existing esplanade, the Paseo del Carmen, it was decided to make a short cut with granite steps skirting round the foundations of the South side of the Convent Church of the Concepcion Franciscana.

The whole area immediately below the Convent was planted with a mixture of flowers and shrubs - lilac, buddleia, oleander, geranium, yucca, cambronera - and two standpipes were provided to water them.

Although the concept is basically good, and the new path does have a steady traffic up and down it, it must be said that the reality has certain shortcomings. The standard of maintenance - responsibility of the Municipality - is very poor: the plantations have been let go, the lighting no longer works at all and most unfortunately the steps at the top seem to have been built without taking into account the drainage of the little square beyond. The earth has been washed out under them, the steps themselves have collapsed and presumably as a consequence the Convent Church now has foundation problems, with a very prominent new settlement fissure running across the vault of the South Transept. The steps cut about ten yards off the ascent...

Restoration

The Alcantara Bridge was 'restored' in about 1973. The westernmost arch, nearest to the city, had previously been shored up and was consolidated by cement grouting. The mudejar tower seems to have been left untouched, despite the perilous state of some of the crenellations; a neighbouring bastion was built up to road level in conjunction with a road-widening scheme. The external face of the ramparts also appears to have been left untouched, though traces of earlier work are still visible. There are said to be plans to build them up 'by a metre or two'.

The restoration of the Convent is outside the scope of this report, but it too looks to be a piecemeal affair. The East end of the Church has been repaired and repointed, and a Gothic lancet window has been brought to light; but the rest of the same facade has been left to crumble.

Construction Schedule and Costs

Work continued on the site for six years, from 1971 to 1977. The total cost was \$273938, with 15% being funded locally by the Municipality and the balance by the Spanish Government.

Conclusion

There is much work of an exemplary nature being done in Spain today. Toledo has an enviable record for the conservation of its heritage, and has been particularly attentive to landscaping and paving. These projects have much that is good in them, and they evince nothing but the best intentions towards the Islamic heritage of Spain. But they are typical of the ad hoc approach which was prevalent until recently. In this sense it is impossible to describe them as exemplary.