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Modern Design:  
Social Commitment  
& Quality of Life

**Proceedings**

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# Modern Design: Social Commitment & Quality of Life

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# Contents

	<b>Introduction</b>	17
	<b>Modern Design: Social Commitment and Quality of Life</b> CARMEN JORDÁ, MAITE PALOMARES	18
	<b>Retracing and Reframing the Legacy of Modern Movement</b> UTA POTTGIESSER	23
	<b>The Polytechnic University of Valencia in the 17<sup>th</sup> International Docomomo Conference</b> JOSÉ E. CAPILLA ROMÁ	26
	<b>17th International Docomomo Conference In Valencia</b> JOAN RIBÓ I CANUT	27
	<b>Welcoming in the 17<sup>th</sup> International Docomomo Conference</b> HÉCTOR ILLUECA BALLESTER	29
	<b>Caring about our recent past</b> IVÁN CABRERA I FAUSTO	31
	<b>World Design Capital Valencia 2022 and Docomomo International</b> MARISA GALLÉN	32
	<b>#01 The European Avant-Garde</b>	35
<b>S01</b>	<b>The Avant-Gardes: a Laboratory for a New Way of Life</b> MAITE PALOMARES FIGUERES	36
	Le Corbusier and the Standard Kitchen in the 1920s. From <i>Purism</i> to Taylorism ÉLISE KOERING	39
	The Pavilion of the Union des Artistes Modernes (UAM) at the Paris International Exhibition in 1937: Art for All, by Everyone and in Everything CAROLINE BAUER	47
	RFG and the Beginnings of Modern Living JADWIGA URBANIK, EDYTA NAWORSKA	55
	Localisation of Modern Architecture through the Antonin Raymond-Designed Former Tetsuma Akaboshi House YUTA GENDA	63
	Avant-garde installations. Mies and Bacon for the plant systems of Villa Tugendhat in Brno ANNA BONORA, KRISTIAN FABBRI, GIULIA FAVARETTO, MARCO PRETELLI	72

<b>S02</b>	<b>A Century of Revolutions and Revolutionists</b>	82
	ANDREA CANZIANI	
	(Un)folded the modernist interior of Belgian abstract painter Jozef Peeters. The architectural vision beyond the studio flat (re)presented	86
	SELIN GEERINCKX, ELS DE VOS	
	Victor Servranckx (1897–1965): abstract art in an architectural setting	94
	ANN VERDONCK	
	Modernism for the Masses: the Case of Dublin's Social Housing	102
	ERYK RAWICZ–LIPINSKI	
	A Revolutionary Recipe for Housewives: the Cubex Kitchen	111
	MARGOT MISSOORTEN, ANN VERDONCK, MARJAN STERCKX	
	 <b>#02 Post-war. International expansion</b>	 121
<b>S03</b>	<b>The Visible and the Invisible</b>	122
	CÉSAR BARGUES BALLESTER	
	Made in Cape Town: Modernist Urban Factories of Observatory and Salt River	124
	SANDRA VAN DER MERWE	
	California Interior Design and the Queer Eye: John Entenza's Two Case Study Houses	133
	JOSÉ PARRA–MARTÍNEZ, MARÍA–ELIA GUTIÉRREZ–MOZO, ANA GILSANZ–DÍAZ	
	Angelo Mangiarotti And Bruno Morassutti: From The Many United States to The Many Italies	142
	FRANCISCO JAVIER SAENZ GUERRA	
	Beyond the <i>Synthèse des Arts</i> . The Behaviorism of Jean Tschumi's Postwar Interiors	150
	GIULIA MARINO	
	Conserving Postwar Public Interiors: the Notion of "Genre" ( <i>Gattung</i> ) as an Operational Tool	159
	ROBERTA GRIGNOLO	
<b>S04</b>	<b>"Found" in Translation: Modern Episodes around the World</b>	168
	MARTA SILVEIRA PEIXOTO	
	Modernist Design Values in the Architecture of the Socialist Community Centre in Konjic	169
	LEJLA KREŠEVLJAKOVIĆ	
	The bathroom in <i>The House of the Future</i> from 1955, discovering a new quality of life	177
	FRANCESCA CASTANÒ, ELENA POZZI	
	From the "House of the Future" to the "Ruin in Reverse". Four Exhibitions about (and by) Alison & Peter Smithson	184
	VERÓNICA ROSERO AÑAZCO	

	An Experimental Solution for Modernist Residential Architecture: Cinnah 19 Apartment Block EMRE DEDEKARGINOĞLU, DENİZ CAN	193
	Exploring Modern Interiors in Mozambique PATRICIA NOORMAHOMED	201
	Adopting models, constructing values: The case of PRIMA department store in Split, Croatia SANJA MATIJEVIĆ BARČOT	209
<b>S05</b>	<b>Evolution of the internationalisation of modern design: a look at the beginnings, its development and crisis</b> FERNANDO USÓ MARTÍN	220
	Brutal Aesthetics Effects in Post–War Turkey: Experimental Interior Spaces OZLEM BALCI–OZTURK	223
	James Speyer's Master's Thesis: Studying Domestic Architecture under Mies ZAIDA GARCIA–REQUEJO, KRISTIN JONES	232
	Ettore Sottsass, architect BEATRIZ MARTÍNEZ LAUWERS	240
	Housing in the city: Is this the best we can do? Reflections on housing in the Architectural Forum during the post–war era IGNACIO URBISTONDO ALONSO	246
<b>S06</b>	<b>Industrialization: Processes and Products</b> UTA POTTGIESSER	256
	SEA, Sun and Fun: Georges Candilis' researches on leisure units (1963–1979) CATHERINE BLAIN, LAURENT DUPORT	258
	The Young Generation of Architects Faces the Pitfalls of Late Modernism and Socialist Central Planning PETR VORLÍK	267
	The Role of Construction Companies in Modern Housing. Precol's Footprint in Late Colonial Angola INÊS LIMA RODRIGUES	276
	1952, Berlin, "Wir bauen ein besseres Leben": <i>USA takes command</i> JULIO GARNICA GONZÁLEZ–BARCENA	287
<b>S07</b>	<b>The global expansion (of modern architecture) in the post–war period, themes and variations of international style. An introduction to new contributions</b> FRANZ GRAF	298
	Migration and the Architecture of the City. Planning and Expansion of Modern Architecture in Israel MARILDA AZULAY TAPIERO	302
	Lima la moderna (1937–1969) Expansion of modern culture and multi–storey buildings in Peru JAVIER ATOCHE INTILI	311

	Post-war healthcare architecture in Portugal. From ordering bodies to the evasion of the <i>Self</i>	319
	DANIELA ARNAUT	
	Local Community Centre as Utilitarian, Governing and Social Space: The Case of New Belgrade CMZ	329
	ANICA DRAGUTINOVIC, UTA POTTGIESSER, WIDO QUIST	
	Prefabrication, Art & Architecture, and Urbanism in Agricultural Cooperative Buildings by Masato Otaka	338
	SUMIKO EBARA	
	<b>#03 The latin American contribution</b>	349
<b>S08</b>	<b>Latin America Contributions and Influences</b>	350
	LOUISE NOELLE GRAS	
	The Nezahualcóyotl Concert Hall Brutalist Architecture Emerging From The Rock	354
	ISAURA GONZÁLEZ GOTTDIENER	
	From fragmentation to the protection of the Heritage of the Modern Movement in Quito from 1940 to 1970	364
	CAROLINA LUNA MARÍN, NÉSTOR LLORCA VEGA	
	Vertical living, a modern way of living	374
	MARIA CRISTINA CABRAL	
	Modernism and its counter-narratives: methodological drifts and dawns in Latin America	382
	YAZMÍN M. CRESPO CLAUDIO	
	Curative landscapes: Healthcare and Social Architecture in Brazil by João Filgueiras Lima, Lelé	394
	CARLA ZOLLINGER	
	Classical Tradition, Tectonics and Modern Architecture: Acacio Gil Borsoi's civic buildings in Northeastern Brazil in the 1970s	403
	FERNANDO DINIZ MOREIRA	
<b>S09</b>	<b>Modern Latin America: new cartographies and challenges</b>	414
	CAROLINA QUIROGA	
	The preservation of modern Brazilian heritage from the sustainability perspective: a case study on Pedregulho	417
	JOSIANE PATRÍCIA TALAMINI, JOANA BASTOS MALHEIRO	
	FILIPPE GONZÁLEZ	
	Conjunto Habitacional Cerro Sur. Román Fresnedo Siri	425
	NATHÁLIA BICHINHO C. OLIVEIRA	
	Learnings from <i>Escuela Tapatía</i> . The study of the use of sunlight as a wellness proposal since the public space to the contained space	433
	ISAMAR ANICIA HERRERA PIÑUELAS, ALFRED ESTELLER AGUSTÍ	
	ADOLFO VIGIL DE INSAUSTI	

	Brazilian modern houses in the 1960s: gourmet <i>favelization</i> MARTA SILVEIRA PEIXOTO, CARLOS EDUARDO COMAS	442
<b>S10</b>	<b>Transatlantic Modernities</b> FERNANDO AGRASAR QUIROGA	450
	Suite Iberia: Spanish Influence on Modern Caracas Architecture HANNIA GÓMEZ	454
	Königsberg's New and Truthful Architecture. An alternative to the Modern Movement architecture in Mexico ALEJANDRO LEAL MENEGUS	463
	The Hotel and The Road: From Singular And The Local Yachting Club to Interconnected and the Continental Pan-American Teodoro Roosevelt Road; A Transformation Of an Anonymous Landscape; 1946–1956 LOGAN LEYTON OSSANDÓN	472
	The urban cultural heritage in the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro: APAC Marechal Hermes and the Modern social housing as cultural preservation display in marginal spaces LARA SCANAPIECO BARRETO, ANDRÉA DE LACERDA PÊSSOA BORDE	483
	Italo Sasso Scampini and the genesis of the Chilean industrial heritage: <i>la Fábrica de la Sociedad Nacional de Envases y Enlozados</i> in Valparaíso (Chile) PABLO MILLÁN MILLÁN, SIMONA BELMONDO	495
<b>S11</b>	<b>The Latin American impact</b> ANA TOSTÕES	504
	<i>Experimental Multiplanta Multifamily Building in Malecón and F (Girón</i> Building, Havana, Cuba, 1967): a document to preserve its memory ÓSCAR PEDRÓS FERNÁNDEZ, SARA RODRÍGUEZ CAJARAVILLE	508
	Alejandro Zohn: structure & form CLAUDIA RUEDA VELÁZQUEZ, ISABELA DE RENTERÍA CANO MAGDA MÀRIA SERRANO	517
	Modern Pocitos. Domestic interior in high rise dwellings in Montevideo (1950–1970) ALFREDO PELÁEZ IGLESIAS, MAXIMILIANO GARCÍA VAIRO NATHÁLIA OLIVERA	526
	On Nature and Environmentalism: notes on Brazilian Modern Architecture's Legacy CLÁUDIA COSTA CABRAL	534
	Modern Architecture historiography and Latin America: postcolonial challenges to overcome silences and biases RUTH VERDE ZEIN, HORACIO TORRENT	543



	<b>#04 Modern pioneering women</b>	551
<b>S12</b>	<b>Breaking down Myths: Great Women in Architecture</b>	552
	RUTH VERDE ZEIN	
	Expanding the Field: Esmée Cromie's Version of Modern Architecture	554
	BÁRBARA ROZAS, ROMY HECHT	
	On the contribution of Sibyl Moholy-Nagy to the Historiography of Modern Architecture: The Diaspora	563
	IGNACIO URBISTONDO ALONSO	
	Edith Emery and the Glazed Igloo in an Icy Desert	573
	STUART KING, FABIOLA SOLARI IRRIBARRA, MAT HINDS	
	Designer, researcher, and teacher. Angela Schweitzer's integral modern practice	583
	FABIOLA SOLARI IRRIBARRA, HUGO MONDRAGÓN LÓPEZ	
<b>S13</b>	<b>Female Pioneering architects. From 'Bribes de conversation' to an integral History of Architecture</b>	594
	MAR LOREN-MÉNDEZ	
	Two Pioneering Female Architects in South Africa. Gertruida Brinkman and Eleanor Ferguson	597
	NICHOLAS CLARKE, MARIEKE KUIPERS	
	Complex appropriations. Other Otherness: Otti Berger and Vladimira Bratuš	605
	NATAŠA KOSELJ	
	The absence of the first Spanish women architects in the registers of the modern movement	613
	ARIANNA GUARDIOLA-VÍLLORA, LUISA BASSET-SALOM	
	ELENA NAVARRO-ASTOR	
	The Power of Void: Charlotte Perriand's Lesson from Japan	624
	CATERINA, FRANCHINI	
	Pioneers. Polish modernist female architects. The centre and peripheries	633
	AGNIESZKA TOMASZEWICZ, JOANNA MAJCZYK	
<b>S14</b>	<b>Making visible: women architects and designers</b>	644
	ZAIDA MUXÍ MARTÍNEZ	
	Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky – two rescued Works: her own Apartment and the 'Building of Truth' in Vienna	647
	WOLFGANG H. SALCHER	
	A Fair Recognition: [On set with] Lilly Reich	658
	DÉBORA DOMINGO-CALABUIG, LAURA LIZONDO-SEVILLA	
	AVELINA PRAT-GARCÍA	
	Jaqueline Tyrwhitt and the Ethics of Post-war Modern Planning: Globalisation, Recentralisation, Humanisation	666
	IOANNA PINIARA	
	Teresa Almendra's House of Oz and the expansion of the modern	674
	PATRÍCIA SANTOS PEDROSA, LIA GIL ANTUNES	

	Being-in-the-boundary. The project of the envelope in the constellation of Suzana Antonakakis ROCÍO NARBONA FLORES	683
<b>S15</b>	<b>Women in Architecture</b> MANUEL BLANCO, CARMEN MARTÍNEZ	692
	The silent gesture. Pauline Gibling Schindler in modern architecture ANDREA CASTRO MARCUCCI	696
	Pliable architecture – Anni Albers, a modern visionary CONSTANZE SIXT	704
	Charlotte Perriand and Lilly Reich: furniture is architecture MARÍA MELGAREJO BELENGUER	712
	The Bauhaus Women Architects: Dicker, Meyer-Waldeck and Wilke JOSENIÁ HERVÁS Y HERAS	720
	<b>#05 Iberia. Cultural identity</b>	729
<b>S16</b>	<b>The development of modern movement in the socio-political and cultural framework of Iberia after the Second World War and in the 1960s and 1970s</b> BÁRBARA COUTINHO	730
	A Home For Tourists. Two Cases of Hotel Interior Design In Majorca MARÍA SEBASTIÁN SEBASTIÁN	733
	Echoes of Japan: An Interpretation of Fernando Távora's Approach to Design JOÃO MIGUEL COUTO DUARTE, MARIA JOÃO MOREIRA SOARES	742
	Urban futures of a recent Portuguese past: Francisco Conceição Silva and the Megastructures GUILHERME RENE MAIA	751
	The Olivais neighborhoods as a laboratory for housing development in Lisbon. Translations between architecture and socioeconomic stratification ANA TOSTÕES, ZARA FERREIRA	760
<b>S17</b>	<b>Modern Movement, the case of Iberia and its particular cultural identity</b> SUSANA LANDROVE BOSSUT	770
	Furniture Design as a Spatial Strategy and Modern Identity in the Interwar Period: Design Contributions by Spanish Architects MARÍA VILLANUEVA FERNÁNDEZ, HÉCTOR GARCÍA-DIEGO VILLARÍAS	772
	New domestic interiors: 1961 exco's exhibition for modest housing MARIA ANTON-BARCO	781
	Approaches to modern architecture through paper cutouts FERNANDO JIMÉNEZ PARRAS	790

	Cheste Workers University's Textures: materiality as a quality in modern design	798
	MAITE PALOMARES FIGUERES, FERNANDO USÓ MARTÍN	
<b>S18</b>	<b>Utility, discipline and a common language</b>	806
	ALBERTO RUBIO GARRIDO	
	Artistic practice as a tool for conserving the memory and essence of Modern architecture. The case of the Lluís Vives Residence Hall in Valencia. Spain	810
	FRANCISCO DE LA TORRE OLIVER, EDUARDO SERRANO GONZÁLEZ	
	Influences and context in the furniture of Miguel Fisac	819
	TEODORO SÁNCHEZ-MIGALLÓN JIMÉNEZ	
	Tuna architectures in the south Iberian peninsula	828
	DIEGO INGLEZ DE SOUZA	
	Approaches on furniture in the integral design of Moreno Barberá	837
	IVO ELISEO VIDAL CLIMENT, FERNANDO USÓ MARTÍN	
	CIRO MANUEL VIDAL CLIMENT	
	<b>#06 New materials and innovative technologies</b>	849
<b>S19</b>	<b>"Material imagination": on the changing meaning of the MoMo's materials and technologies</b>	850
	ZSUZSANNA BÖRÖCZ	
	Krausz Patented Steel-framed Windows: from remarkable phenomenon to huge obstacle	854
	HENRIETA MORAVČÍKOVÁ	
	New Materials on Show. Legacy of the Italian Fascist Exhibitions between Autarchy and Innovation (1932–40)	863
	SARA DI RESTA	
	Retrofitting UNESCO's heritage: the first Olivetti office building in Ivrea (1960–1963)	872
	GIUSEPPE GALBIATI, FRANZ GRAF, GIULIA MARINO	
	The Relighting of San Francesco al Fopponino. The lighting Project in a church by Gio Ponti, and the Importance of its Restoration	882
	GIULIO SAMPAOLI	
	Cemesto: A Twentieth-Century Structural Insulating Material. Conservation Challenges	892
	CÉŠAR BARGUES BALLESTER, CHANDLER MCCOY	
<b>S20</b>	<b>Concepts, Processes, and Realization: the tangible and intangible values of innovation in modern heritage</b>	902
	SUSAN MACDONALD, DREW BARNHART	
	From A. Klein to C. Price. The parametric search for quality of life	905
	DAVID HERNÁNDEZ FALAGÁN, MOHAMMADAMIN ZIAIEBIGDELI	

	Construction Site of Prototypes of Binishells. From Innovation to Abandonment	914
	FRANCESCA ALBANI, ALESSANDRO CAVALLO, CARLO DUSI	
	Systematic Modern: Önder Küçükerman's Holistic Approach to Turkish Interiors	922
	DENİZ HASIRCI, ZEYNEP TUNA ULTAV, MELİS ÖRNEKOĞLU SELÇUK	
	Material inventions leading to innovation in the quality of space	930
	SANKET MHATRE, CHAITRA SHARAD	
	<b>#07 Urban design and quality of life</b>	945
<b>S21</b>	<b>The place of the community in the crossroads between the global and local modernization processes</b>	946
	ZARA FERREIRA	
	Considering Plurality and Miscegenation: the case of Michenzani Blocks, in Zanzibar	949
	MARIA MANUEL OLIVEIRA, MANUELA PALMEIRIM	
	Exploring visual language and typologies in Dutch midrise residential neighbourhoods	957
	LIDWINE SPOORMANS, WESSEL DE JONGE, DARINKA CZISCHKE ANA PEREIRA RODERS	
	From Abadan to Shushtar New Town: The Heritage of Company Towns in Iran	966
	AZAR MOHAMMADPANAH	
	From Siza and Erskine to URBiNAT: participatory architectural design and the European social housing co-production	974
	JOSÉ ANTÓNIO BANDEIRINHA, PAULO FONSECA DE CAMPOS GONÇALO CANTO MONIZ, LUÍS MIGUEL CORREIA, VITÓRIO LEITE	
	Erik Gunnar Asplund. Landscape and civic identity	983
	JAIME J. FERRER FORÉS	
<b>S22</b>	<b>Modern Urban Design and the challenge of improving people's quality of life in the industrial metropolis</b>	992
	CARLOS GARCÍA VÁZQUEZ	
	The biopolitics of a Company Town: Shaping the Urban, Shaping Identities in Dalmine, Italy	995
	ANNA KARLA DE ALMEIDA SANTOS	
	Modern capitals of the twentieth century: Mapping Brasília and Chandigarh	1005
	ISADORA DE ALMEIDA FURTADO, LUCIANA SABOIA FONSECA CRUZ	
	Updating the Post-war neighbourhood Mariahoeve	1014
	PEER PETERS	
	A Study of Urban Morphological Models and Pedestrian Network Regarding Volumetric Podium-Pedestrian Complex in High-Density Hong Kong	1023
	SIBEI LIU	

<b>S23</b>	<b>Urban design and quality of life: Acknowledgment, Generosity, and Care</b>	1034
	HENRIETA MORAVČÍKOVÁ	
	Brasília's Historic Urban Landscape: The Paranoá Park Condominium's case	1037
	MARIANA FREITAS PRIESTER, ANA ELISABETE DE ALMEIDA MEDEIROS LUCIANA SABOIA	
	The Vera Campus of the Polytechnic University of Valencia. Public space and modernity	1046
	FRANCISCO JUAN MARTÍNEZ-PÉREZ, M.ª DEL CARMEN BLASCO-SÁNCHEZ JULIA DELTORO-SOTO, ANA MARÍA GASCÓN-HERNÁNDEZ	
	New Capital Cities of the 20th Century: Urban project and landscape (Brasília Brazil and Canberra Australia)	1055
	DANIEL SANTA ROSA BITENCOURT, LUCIANA SABOIA FOSECA CRUZ	
	Urban dimension of social housing. Planning and quality of life	1063
	NOELIA CERVERO SÁNCHEZ	
<b>S24</b>	<b>On the Modern Urban in Challenging Times</b>	1072
	DENIZ HASIRCI	
	Valdagno, "Città Sociale" (1927–1937): urban design and quality of life from past society to future development	1076
	VERDIANA PERON, GIORGIO DANESI	
	Two modern monumentalities in Rio de Janeiro Central Area: distinct ways of designing within the historical city	1085
	ANA M. G. ALBANO AMORA, RAFAEL BARCELLOS SANTOS	
	Effectiveness in Adaptive Reuse of Modern Heritage Buildings	1094
	FATEMEH HEDIEH ARFA, WIDO QUIST, BARBARA LUBELLI HIELKJE ZIJLSTRA	
	Modern Times in West Anatolian Cities: Continuity Issues in Urban Planning	1104
	ZEREN ÖNSEL ATALA, YILDIZ SALMAN	

## **#08 Landscapes and gardens** 1113

<b>S25</b>	<b>Landscaping and the relationship with nature in Spain in the 1930s Changes brought about by the influence of the Modern Movement</b>	1114
	ANA ROMÁN ESCOBAR	
	Spanish Colonisation Villages in the Province of Granada (1939–1977). Agricultural Infrastructures Inserted in the Urban Fabric: Tobacco Drying Houses	1118
	ANA ISABEL RODRÍGUEZ AGUILERA, LORETO CORISCO GONZÁLEZ	
	Path to modernism. Winthuysen and Rigol's Spanish gardens in the 1930s	1127
	JUAN JOSÉ TUSET-DAVÓ	
	The <i>Rincón de Goya</i> garden. The first modern Spanish garden	1135
	MIGUEL ÁNGEL RUANO HERNANSANZ	
	The Introduction of Modern Landscaping in Madrid	1146
	BENITO JIMÉNEZ ALCALÁ, EVA J. RODRÍGUEZ ROMERO	

<b>S26</b>	<b>Modern Human Landscape</b>	1154
	ALBERTO SANZ HERNANDO	
	Reuse Modern landscape: a pedagogical programme on co-creation of inclusive and innovative public spaces	1156
	CAROLINA QUIROGA, GONÇALO CANTO MONIZ	
	ANA MARIA REIS DE GOES MONTEIRO	
	Modernization of Chinese Garden concept in University Campus Landscape Design: From Hua Tung university to Tung Hai university	1166
	NING TSAI	
	Copacabana Promenade: design as heritage	1176
	ANA CAROLINA PELLEGRINI	
	Contemporary continuity of an introverted heritage site – The case of the <i>Cité Modèle</i> of Heysel (Brussels, Belgium)	1185
	MORGANE BOS	
	The modern garden in German schools in Spain and Portugal. Rubió i Tudurí at the <i>Deutsche Schule Valencia</i>	1194
	IRENE BENET MORERA	
	<b>Biographies</b>	1205
	<b>Acknowledgements</b>	1242
	<b>Supporters</b>	1248
	<b>docomomo International Institutional partners &amp; Institutional members</b>	1250

# **Spanish Colonisation Villages in the Province of Granada (1939–1977). Agricultural Infrastructures Inserted in the Urban Fabric: Tobacco Drying Houses**

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The Spanish domestic colonisation of the 20th century was a territorial planning project which followed a policy of recovering agricultural land and making it habitable, according to an innovative collective model for rural exploitation. This colonisation by the Spanish government led to the creation of approximately three hundred colonisation villages throughout the country between 1939 and 1977. The new architecture played a fundamental role because of the relationship it established with the productive landscape. The novelty of this colonisation settlements led to the creation of an urban model that combined the agrarian and architectural structure within a reinterpretation of what rural life and its collective working means.

Exceptionally, there are cases in which collective elements linked to agricultural exploitation were introduced into the urban fabric. This particularity is found in two villages in the province of Granada, Peñuelas and El Chaparral, where a group of twenty tobacco drying houses constituted a singular architectural element of transition between the agricultural and the urban layout. Tobacco drying sheds are part of the agricultural heritage of the fertile plains of Granada and their scattered implantation throughout the territory makes them recognisable landmarks in the landscape due to their scale, construction typologies and formal characteristics. The refined structure of these vernacular constructions houses the tobacco leaves drying for months. Their functional precision resides in the lattice panels that, whilst allowing air and light pass through, constitute breathtaking spaces. This gives them an appearance that unexpectedly creates continuity with the modern architecture of the colonisation villages.

This paper presents a cartographic and photographic research carried out on these two atypical grid layouts of drying sheds, which generate a sequence of transparencies separated by streets as social urban places combined with their productive nature. This exercise of displacement and repetition constitutes an unusual reinterpretation of an agrarian infrastructure that links modernity with the agricultural legacy.

## **1. Introduction to spanish domestic colonisation of the 20th century**

The Spanish domestic colonisation of the 20th century was a territorial planning project which followed a policy of recovering agricultural land

and making it habitable, according to an innovative collective model for rural exploitation of great economic, social, and productive interest which transformed the national rural landscape. This nationwide experience carried out between 1939 and 1977 is widely known internationally, and it falls within several large-scale policies of agricultural regeneration carried out simultaneously in different countries including Italy, Germany, Portugal, Israel, and the United States.

The Spanish agricultural development policy was coordinated by the *Instituto Nacional de Colonización* (INC, 1939–1971) [National Institute for Colonisation] and later by the *Instituto de Reforma y Desarrollo Agrario* (IRYDA, 1971–1977) [Institute of Agricultural Reform and Development], which reworked colonisation plans dating from the early 20th century. This agricultural development policy added to the debate on precarious living conditions and deficient use of the agricultural fields which had begun in the mid-19th century. This led to the reactivation of rural settings, the renewal of agricultural techniques, and the improvement of the habitat, constructing almost three hundred new colonisation villages which become an experimental field for modern architecture at that time.

This colonisation plan involved a complete reform of vast areas of land through the regeneration of barely productive fields by creating hydraulic infrastructures on different scales, from large reservoirs to small irrigation ditches distributed throughout the territory. These infrastructures were followed by other actions such as reforestation of mountains, defending hydraulic basins, reallotting agricultural land into smaller plots and new plantations, creating service roads, and constructing villages for the agricultural workers or settlers, named *colonos*, working on the land. This large-scale operation respected the ecological and geographical characteristics of the territory, providing services and infrastructures to improve the working of the agricultural landscape. This was undoubtedly the greatest agricultural enterprise carried out by the Spanish government that combined geography, civil engineering, agricultural engineering, and architecture in a single joint project specifically adapted to each place.

In drawing up this multi-scale and interdisciplinary project, the main agents taking part were the civil engineers and, above all, the agricultural engineers. The civil engineers were in charge of capturing water and building dams and reservoirs, as well as connecting the land to be developed with new means of communication. The agricultural engineers identified estates with agricultural potential and planned the territory according to the distribution of water for irrigation, the agricultural division of land, the selection of crops to be produced, and the ideal location of new colonisation villages which would be designed by architects in the culmination of this multi-scale process.

Those new colonisation villages created soon became the representative image of the new agricultural policy. These villages, along with their landscape, represented a multidisciplinary and comprehensive vision of land intervention,



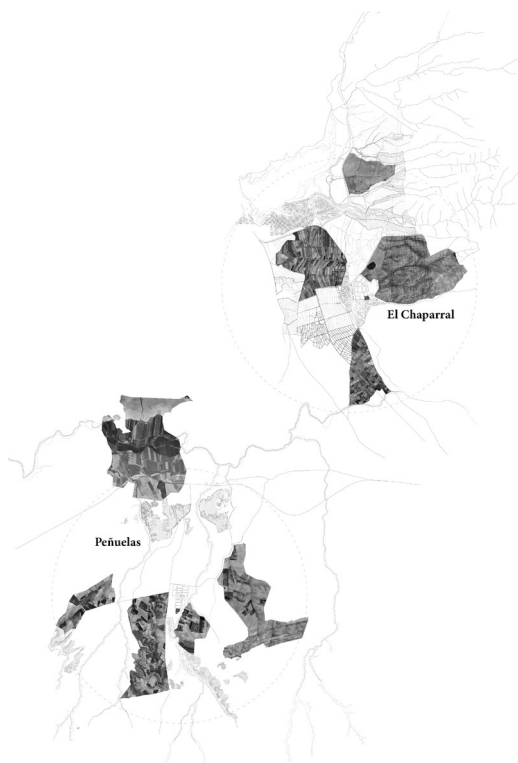


Figure 1. Cartography of agricultural landscape surrounding the colonisation villages of Peñuelas and El Chaparral, Granada, Spain.  
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transformed following minimum energy criteria and making use of pre-existing elements and infrastructures.

The use of the term “colonisation” to describe this ambitious project was no accident. It linked both agriculture and architecture with the shared placement within the land of the spaces for work and the homes of the agricultural workers in a modern interpretation of rural settlement with collective facilities. Thus, the term “colonisation villages” highlighted the intrinsically architectural nature of this process of agricultural use of the land, hence its vital importance when creating the image of colonisation as a new form of life in rural settings. The rural alternative was presented as a viable option, comparable in comfort to life in the city and with the possibility of enjoying a healthier setting in contact with “nature” (Fig. 1).

## 2. Spanish colonisation villages: public spaces, facilities, and infrastructures

The new architecture of the Spanish colonisation villages played a fundamental role because of the relationship it established

with the productive landscape, which took as a starting point traditional rural architecture. There are similarities between the way of life of the new settlers in the colonisation villages and the organisation of existing farmsteads in terms of the relationship between agricultural and domestic uses around the courtyard. The new dwellings can be understood as a fragmentation of the organisation of the farmsteads within a more “urban” context. In addition to the intimate private domestic spaces, public facilities and squares in the village promoted the collective life of settlers around places for leisure, fairs, cultural, educational, or administrative activities.

The novelty of this colonisation settlement, a modern heterogeneous solution between the rural villages and the farmsteads, led to the creation of an urban model that combined the agrarian and architectural structure within a reinterpretation of what rural life and its collective working means.

The design of the urban structure and the architecture of such colonisation villages was carried out by both architects and agricultural engineers. This task followed a program of housing and amenities established by the INC in

accordance to three main issues: (1) size, (2) number of *colonos* (economically independent families to whom a house with a huge backyard was assigned along with agricultural dependencies and an agriculture plot) and agricultural workers (machinists and labourers who helped the *colonos* in the plot exploitation and who were assigned a house with a minor backyard a small orchard for personal use), and (3) the expected growth of the village.

With these considerations in mind, the colonisation villages responded to geometric urban layouts, with streets shaped by the alternate rhythm of the façades of the houses and the walls that delimited their courtyards, along with squares around which the public facilities were articulated. The facilities programme of a medium-sized colonisation village consisted of a generous approach to create self-sufficient nuclei with a church, town hall, social building, medical dispensary, schools, and shops. Larger villages could also have an agricultural cooperative, sports facilities, and a cemetery.

In most of the villages, the spaces linked to agriculture were reserved in the private agrarian outbuildings and courtyards of each settler's house. Exceptionally, there are cases where collective elements linked to agricultural exploitation were introduced into the urban fabric. This particularity is found in two colonisation villages in the province of Granada designed by the architect José García-Nieto Gascón: Peñuelas (1956) and El Chaparral (1957). In both of them, a group of twenty tobacco drying houses constituted a singular architectural element of transition between the agricultural and urban layout (**Fig. 2**).

Peñuelas occupies an area of approximately 11.2 ha with the characteristic geometrical urban layout of the villages of colonisation that is traced parallel to the north-south road next to which it is located and bounded between this road and a ravine with leafy trees. At the core of the village there is a nucleus of facilities concentrated around a square comprising the church, two schools, two teachers' houses, the town hall, shops, and a cooperative centre. The rest of the



Figure 2. Photographic composition of tobacco drying houses in Peñuelas and El Chaparral, Granada, Spain. © The authors, 2022.

village consists of 119 houses for settlers and 10 houses for agricultural workers and the reserved area at the southern end, next to the ravine, that locates twenty tobacco drying sheds.

El Chaparral occupies an area of around 12.6 ha at the junction of two roads that border it to the north and west. The open front to the main north–south road was protected with a leafy plantation of trees behind which most of the public facilities were placed, being the roof of the town hall and the church bell tower particularly recognisable. The facilities are sequenced from north to south in this order: town hall, administrative officer's house, shops, social building, church, two schools, rural home for the women's section, health centre and two other schools. Close to these facilities there were four teachers' houses, two to the west of the town hall and two opposite the schools. To complete the public facilities, the rural home for the youth and the market were located to the northeast of the nucleus. A total of 112 houses for settlers and 43 houses for agricultural workers were built, occupying most of the village's surface area. Within the urban layout, what stands out are the empty spaces of seven squares and the group of twenty tobacco drying sheds located in the southeast corner between the village and the olive grove.

### **3. Tobacco Drying Houses in two spanish colonisation villages in the province of granada: peñuelas and el chaparral**

Tobacco drying sheds form part of the agricultural heritage of the fertile plains of Granada and their scattered implantation throughout the territory makes them recognisable landmarks in the landscape due to their scale, construction typologies and formal characteristics.

The tobacco drying sheds built during the 20th century in the *Vega de Granada*<sup>1</sup>, (from the introduction of tobacco cultivation in 1923 until its extinction at the beginning of the 21st century) have responded to different construction typologies and corporeity whose sole objective was to enable the tobacco leaf to be dried in optimum conditions on the basis of simple principles. It consists of a porticoed structure with spans of about four metres that shapes an architecture of about eight metres wide, twenty metres long and eight metres high with a gabled roof on top. This structure is delimited by a perforated outer skin to meet the need for the almost constant ventilation required by the plant once it has been harvested and hung to cure and dry. The layout of the building was also based on the functional logic of favouring cross ventilation, which is why they were oriented in such a way that the prevailing winds would cross the long side of the drying shed.

The great variety and ingenuity in the materiality of the structure (poplar wood, brick, or concrete), the roof (straw or ceramic tile) and the outer skin (straw panels, wooden slats, ceramic latticework, concrete latticework, or movable metal plates) has brought about the most diverse examples. From the most rudimentary to the most refined, all the drying sheds "bear the

essence and logic of the architecture of the Modern Movement"<sup>2</sup>, providing a purified response to a specific need which gives them an image that establishes continuity with the modern architecture of the colonisation villages.

The groups of drying sheds in Peñuelas and El Chaparral were arranged in a grid on the edge of each village, giving rise to an urban street with a mystical character between the drying sheds and the last line of settlers' houses. Between the drying sheds, from the interior streets that separate them, one can appreciate the large empty spaces reserved to be filled with tobacco leaves and the overlap of the different levels of latticework. Both clusters have in common the number of elements, their dimensions, the distance between them, the exposed structure of reinforced concrete beams and pillars and the gable roof with a wooden structure and flat ceramic tiles. The differences between the two cases are to be found in the lattices, which were made of prefabricated concrete of different dimensions and proportions.

In Peñuelas (**Fig. 3**), each panel of latticework is a single large-format element framed by the structure with small vertical openings. In the drying sheds at El Chaparral (**Fig. 4**), the lattice is the result of pieces of 4x2 and 4x1 square voids arranged horizontally and combined, generating different wefts. In both cases, the result of the merging of the regular structure and the large panels of latticework are surprising interiors due to their height, the qualities of the filtered natural light that bathes the space, and the exterior landscape, both urban and agricultural, that can be sensed filtered through them.

This construction system, which is both functional and industrial, can be found in a similar way in other drying sheds in the *Vega de Granada*. The spatial and material qualities of these drying sheds are enhanced by the fact that they are arranged here as a series of geometrically ordered elements following a constant rhythm. Moreover, as they are annexed to the urban layout of the two colonisation villages, an inevitable relationship is established between the scale of the houses and the scale of the drying sheds, giving them a more habitable, and even domestic, character.

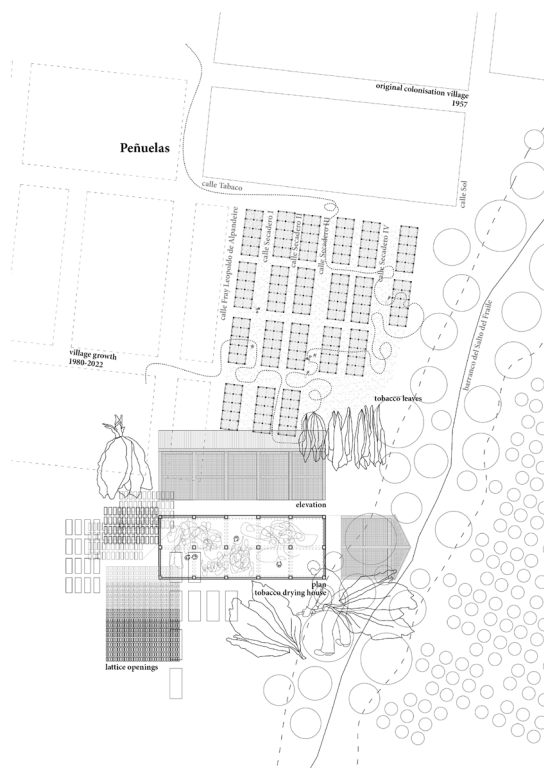


Figure 3. Tobacco drying houses in Peñuelas: graphic composition of structure, architecture, and latticework. © The authors, 2022.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The colonisation villages built in Spain in the second half of the 20th century were conceived within a territorial scale plan whose objective was the regeneration of the agrarian environment and its habitability. The villages were equipped with the infrastructures and the means necessary for the settlers to carry out their agricultural work in a helpful environment to fostering relationships between the members of the community.

Architecture was one piece of the necessary machinery for the agrarian reform. It was conditioned first and foremost by the agricultural programme of colonisation set out by the agricultural engineers. For this reason, although colonisation villages have often been studied from the isolated point of view of architecture, they only make sense in an indivisible connection to their landscape.

In addition to the spaces destined in each house for the courtyard and farm buildings, many of the villages included in their urban structure collective facilities linked to farming. The new architecture

and the public spaces built around it were designed in the language of the Modern Movement of the time, taking into account the heritage of tradition and the rural identity of each place. Its essential design as a response to specific need, with no additional elements, establishes all material, functional and compositional relationships with long-established foundations of the agricultural environment.

Thus, the two sets of tobacco drying sheds in the villages of Peñuelas and El Chaparral (Granada) demonstrate the connections between the new architecture of the colonisation villages and other traditional rural elements, which might have seemed, at first glance, unrelated to one another. Surprisingly, what makes these villages modern relies on its roots and agricultural context. This is a lecture on understanding the value of heritage and culture in the process of creating architecture both today and at that time.

The exercise of displacement and repetition of the tobacco drying shed, an element which is usually found isolated in the territory, constitutes an unusual reinterpretation of an agrarian infrastructure that links modernity with the

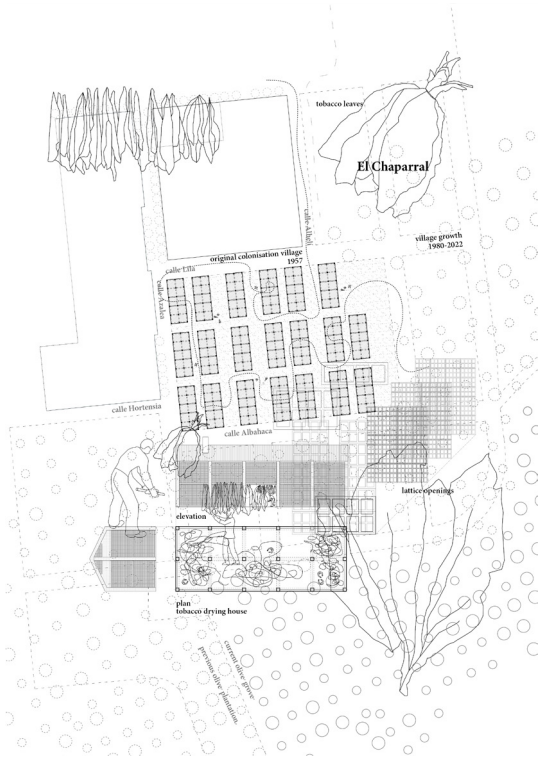


Figure 4. Tobacco drying houses in El Chaparral: graphic composition of structure, architecture, and latticework. © The authors, 2022.

agricultural legacy. These two atypical grid layouts of drying sheds create a sequence of transparencies and streets as social urban places combined with their productive nature. The agricultural cycles determined the relationship that the town established with this singular fragment of its layout. During the time of the year they were empty, they could become leisure spaces, playgrounds. In the tobacco harvesting season, the nearby village streets were bustling with activity and an invasion of the agricultural product that connected the daily urban chores with the work in the fields. During the months in which the tobacco leaves were curing, the clogged drying sheds, which were difficult to walk through, were recognisable as warehouses without any sign of movement around them.

Nowadays, the drying sheds are abandoned and in a state of disrepair. In Peñuelas, they continue to form an edge of the village next to the ravine, while in El Chaparral they have been surrounded by urban growth. Their uncertain future seems to be one of imminent disappearance due to the lack of use and the difficult management of the numerous owners who are the heirs of the first settlers. They continue to define a place where children like to play and people like to gather, and the uniqueness of their interiors, their light, and their temperature, invite to consider other possible fates that take advantage of their singular condition within the urban fabric. Such magical examples of modern architecture, transcendent tokens of heritage, are undoubtedly willing to become places with new, contemporary meanings.

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## Notes

1 *Vega de Granada* is the given name to the fertile plains around the city of Granada.

2 Juan Francisco García, "Los secaderos de tabaco en la Vega de Granada. Una indagación gráfica" (PhD diss., University of Granada, 2017), 313.



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