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C.D. Mifsut García

*Town Planning Department, EHVA-Entitat Valenciana d'Habitatge
i Sòl-valencian entity for housing-
Spain, Valencia, Vinatea 14, 46001
e-mail: cmifsutg@gmail.com*

EXPRESSIONIST URBAN RENEWAL INTERVENTIONS: AVENIDA DEL OESTE IN VALENCIA AMONG OTHER VALUABLE CASES

Abstract: *The last great urban renewal interventions in a Haussmannian way were developed along the 20th century deeply related to modern avant-gardes' architecture. The success of those urban interventions is largely due to the construction of modern, iconic buildings widely recognisable by the public. Rationalist expressionist buildings became the optimal picture of modernity in cities' refurbishment. Some cases show a sort of gate to modernity by the construction of twin, modern buildings at both sides of a new urban street. Avenida del Oeste in Valencia was one of the latest examples to be implemented, it is also one of the best examples on the matter.*

Keywords: *urban renewal, historical centre, urban pattern, comparative analysis, expressionism.*

Introduction – Latest Haussmannian urban renewal and expressionism

Urban renewal implementations following Haussmann examples spread all over European cities in the late 19th century. The interventions opened in Paris between 1853 and 1870 – enlarged in some works until 1927- were the origin of several new streets and avenues in European cities. On the other hand, while the new 20th century was coming up, it was necessary to update the existing city, closely related to the city wall demolitions. The greater the demolition works were, the more intensive old town refurbishment was needed. Urban interventions had to face not only the reshaping of those wall spaces, but also the updating of inner urban spaces into old towns. This was an imperative task to improve in order to include the old town into the new, successful city growing up beyond old walls.

Baron Haussmann updated the existing city in Paris creating a clear theoretical corpus into town planning. Military or social reasons aside, new street lines in Haussmann plans actually defined urban facings to be built behind. New street lines induced buildings' substitution linked to the reduction in surface of the new urban plots, because these new urban lines superimposed on the ancient urban pattern to create new, reduced urban plots to build in. Therefore, new buildings facing the new avenues were connected to old buildings backwards. In this case, strong municipal rules for façades in Paris –also a proposal by Baron Haussmann and Napoleon government- gave unity to the whole intervention in the city.

This way of re-building the old town through architectural works was the procedure extended in all the cases. In fact, the later the intervention, the more modern is the architectural style to be built. That is the reason that the appearance of expressionist architecture in the 1920s became a perfect language to use in such irregular plan shape plots, most of them in corner situations.

This is the framework where Mendelsohn works appeared. His architectural masterpieces were reference models to follow, by accomplishing modernity and city updating. These are Mosehaus in Berlin (1925), Petersdorff department store in Wrocław (1928) and Schocken Department Stores in Stuttgart (1928) and Chemnitz (1930) among others. All of them have something in common, being building replacements into the existing city. Moreover, all these

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buildings are located in corner plots where expressionist curved facing takes the best position to call all the attention and to be seen from several points in the city. The use of a new architectural language by Mendelsohn provided a real freshness of modernity: expressionist architecture solved in a whole modernity architectural expression and urban renewal integration.

This was a technical handbook followed in urban renewal in that period, when all urban interventions in a city scale took the decision to show the modern times after World War I. From this moment, expressionist rationalist architecture was undoubtedly linked to city modernity, and those renowned masterpieces were the reference for every architectural urban refurbishment in Europe throughout the interwar period. Therefore, modern architecture became the imagen of urban renewal, and such *landmarks* provided a real place comprehension. Moreover, as an extension of that, landmarks provided the comprehension of the whole urban reality as a modern, even cosmopolitan reality.

In the same way proposed by Lynch, landmarks show the other distinguishing feature in every city, in addition to their own urban morphology. Moreover, such elements shown a particular location in all the cases, not only at the endpoints of the street, but also around of city nodes, in perspective points or at the change of direction in the axis. Quoting Cullen, the master of serial vision of the city, every moment on the path is illuminated by a series of sudden contrasts and so impact is made on the eye bringing the plan to life.

Expressionist urban renewal

Subsequently to expressionist architecture, expressionist planning appeared by delineating those physic rounded corners on the plans. Therefore, the last cases of urban renewal in a Haussmannian way after the 1920s took these expressionist lines to materialise buildings in an expressionist architectural style. That is the case of the latest huge intervention in Spain –and perhaps in Europe- that occurred in Valencia: *Avenida del Oeste* -old town Westside Avenue- as can be read forwards, among many other cases.

A general law can be found in all those cases combining urban renewal and expressionist architecture, where the powerful icon of expressionist rationalist buildings is used to show the starting points of new interventions in the city. In addition, many of the cases show twin buildings on both sides of the street as a sort of an urban gate to the modernity of that new urban area. This is the point to analyse in some cases as can be found hereby, organised into a gradation of urban scale: block refurbishment, urban landmark buildings as a reference of the street and, finally, the whole street as an urban renewal reference.

Urban block: *Skippergata*, Oslo

In this case, the intervention covers the scale of a singular urban block in Oslo. The city extension across the north slope of the ancient wall reserved a special location for raising the cathedral in the 17th century at the point where the northern main road arrived to the city. Out of the city, inner *Skippergata* Street had no extension northwards after the walls demolition, and new urban blocks were growing up with the city. By the 1930s it was decided to extend northwards the street coming from the port in the south, *Skippergata* (“ships street”). This extension will open a new portion of *Skippergata* Street by cutting in half an urban block for reaching the old main entrance road to the city, *Storgata*. This street crossing provided a particular location to remark the modernity of the urban intervention and city updating. This location was emphasised by constructing twin buildings in both sides of the new street as a real gate of *Skippergata* in the north. Both new buildings were designed by Ole Sverre and finished in 1933 and 1934. The buildings in an expressionist rationalist style were, however, severely criticised at that moment, but became a reference for modernity in the country. They represent a sort of expressive urban gate in a block-scale intervention. [Fig.2]

Urban gate: *Bulevardul Magheru* in Bucharest and *Boulevard Pasteur* in Tangier

A similar configuration of two buildings announcing a new urban intervention can be found in Bucharest. Planned in the 1930s, *Bulevardul Magheru* is an opening intervention throughout the city centre to create one of the most modern streets in Europe. It was planned to connect two squares in the North and in the South of the city centre, and a kind of modern urban gate was built in an expressionist architecture style as well. This is a higher scale intervention than in Oslo, both in width and length of the street. However, in the same terms, the power of iconic buildings was the origin of the initial success of the street. The buildings in Bucharest are not twin ones, but define perfect round corner walls from the 1940s to show the modernity of the intervention in contrast to the existing city. [Fig. 2].

In the other case, Tangier (Morocco) offers a sort of urban gate as well, but in one of the growing urban axis of the city, not into the city centre. *Boulevard Pasteur* was one of the axis for the extension of the modern city in the 1920s. In the 1930s the street started to be the place of the modernity and, while the country was a Spanish protectorate by the 1950s, Spanish architects developed a new image in the southern point next to the medina. Two expressionist buildings were raised creating an iconic modern gate near the old town, in a direct connection to European architecture and town planning. [Fig. 2]

Urban landmarks: *Gran Vía*, Madrid and *Via Laietana*, Barcelona

There is another type of urban renewal interventions based on architectural features, by the construction of a singular building. This singularity is due to modernity in architectural language, where the building takes the whole attention and becomes the icon of the modern city. That is the case of one of the best modern architecture pieces in Spain, *Edificio Carrion* that was built in a particular location in *Gran Vía*, in Madrid. This high street was planned to update the ancient city to modern 20th century times. Its singularity lies in a zig-zag pattern crossing and adapted to the existing city, into three portions built in consecutive periods – the first one in a curved axis and the other two ones in a straight line. The street was built between 1910 and 1950 in 3 periods as well, corresponding to those consecutive planned sections. Different architectural languages can be read in the three portions, related to three architectural languages too. In the southern point of the central section, a modern skyscraper raised to point that particular location, *Carrion* building, as a landmark of modernity in the city. Along the 1950s this street became the commercial and business centre, the icon of modernity in the city and in the country, and its plan was the basis of several other town planning interventions in Spain. [Fig.3]

A similar case can be found in Barcelona, where a new straight avenue was built in a Haussmannian way from north to south at the east side of the old town, *Ciutat Vella*. This street was opened in three sections between 1908 and 1913, and it was built in three consecutive portions, as well. In similar terms as *Gran Vía* in Madrid, a particular building was constructed *a posteriori* in the 1940s to emphasise the former urban intervention and a new building became the urban landmark to point the north area of the former new avenue. An expressionist rationalist architectural language goes together with the urban renewal, throughout a building finished in 1942 and designed by one of the most important Spanish architects of that time, Luis Gutiérrez Soto. [Fig.3]

Expressionist urban renewal: *Avenida del Oeste* in Valencia

As it was mentioned above, there is an urban renewal intervention that perhaps is the latest intervention in Europe following the huge Haussmannian way: *Avenida del Oeste* in Valencia, Spain. This implementation delayed in time because of specific social and economic conditions due to Spanish Civil War. It was planned at the beginning of the 20th century although it was under construction between 1941 and 1975. Indeed, this new avenue was planned into a huge refurbishment plan for the whole old town of Valencia, current *Ciutat Vella*. The Avenue firstly appeared in 1911 Plan from Aymami's city architect, and it was one of the two main avenues to

be opened throughout the old town in order to update the ancient city to modern times. At that moment, the starting extension plans for the city were required from the central government in Madrid to include some refurbishment works in old town.

But 1911 Aymami's Plan was not carried out, and there was a revision in 1929 under the supervision of the new city architect, Javier Goerlich. In this second refurbishment plan only *Avenida del Oeste* remained, together with other small corrections to the old town. Goerlich came from an Austro-Hungarian family of diplomats settled in Valencia, and he was in close contact with European architectural trends and movements. That is why he could take the modernity to Valencia from his position as the City Architect into town hall. As this second plan was not carried out neither, the Town Hall decided to take on a separated plan for the Avenue, in 1939, after the Spanish Civil War was over.

The delineation drawings of the Avenue on 1939's plan show the modern, expressionist mind of its author. Goerlich started to exercise expressionist buildings in the city and, as a town planner, he drew the future avenue with round corners in every street crossing, to build expressionist architecture as in the rest of the city. Therefore, *Avenida del Oeste* became the highest concentration of expressionist buildings not only in Valencia, but also in the world.

The *Avenida del Oeste*, was thought to cross the old town in its Westside, from north to south, dividing it in 5 sections. The first two sections were the aim of the initial approval and, just in the same way than his troubled plan, its construction had been delayed for decades only in those 2 parts. Therefore, in 1975 Valencia Town Hall decided to abandon the idea of continuing the avenue, that remained unfinished and without an ending point in the north and breaking its starting idea of crossing the city centre as well.

Despite this non-negligible point, the Avenue became the commercial and modernity centre of the city in the 1950s, following the metropolitan spirit coming from *Gran Vía* in Madrid. Even its unfinished southern two thirds, two expressionist style buildings were finally constructed in its southern end, in connection to the rest of the city. Both buildings became a new urban gate for the city centre. They were designed and built by Ignacio de Cárdenas Pastor in 1946 (on the Eastern corner), and Luis Albert Ballesteros in 1953 (on the Western one). Their height in comparison to the rest of the avenue, and even the opposite city, magnifies their perception, and gave them the materialisation of modernity in Valencia. [Fig. 4]

Thereby, the last Haussmannian avenue in Europe appeared to be unfinished in 1975, and represents one of the set of the most expressionist buildings on a pure expressionist unique plan. All these cases materialise the words of Gordon Cullen on the city perception art in *Townscape* in 1974:

“...let's put a whole series of buildings one next to another and, as a whole, collectively, we will provide much more visual pleasure than the one that would give each of them contemplated separately.

... let's put half a dozen buildings next to each other, and we will see that the existence of another art is possible, quite different from that of architecture”

Conclusion – The idea of urban modernity

Urban renewal interventions in Europe at the end of the 19th century took the Haussmann works in Paris as a handbook of refurbishment for city centres. On the other hand, expressionist trends in architecture in the 1920s gave the possibility of updating old towns to modernity. Both situations met together in the latest interventions, especially in Valencia among others, appearing in a set of singular buildings showing those new interventions. Examples of this can be found all over Europe and its countries' overseas territories, creating a global idea of modern city and modern urban renewal. These lines show a selection of cases where expressionist buildings become landmarks for urban interventions in the city. And all those cases go beyond their architectural basis themselves to create the whole idea of the city modernity.

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