

# AN APPROACH TO THE LANDSCAPE FROM LOCAL ROADS. THE ORANGE GROVES OF THE ALZIRA - CORBERA ROAD (VALENCIA)

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The first railway lines came into service in the mid-19th century. After the basic rail structure was defined, new highways were built. The installation and restructuring of these transport infrastructures in Spain established a series of relationships which enhanced their transformation and integration in the country, contributing to the creation of new landscapes. The historical value acquired as time has passed since the construction of these first roads justifies a preliminary evaluation of some of them as landscape heritage, approached from several different points of view. In recent years, new lines of research have begun to study public works and the built environment (AGUILAR, 2007). They reveal an evolution from the monumentalist view of heritage, where attention is given to certain individual landmarks, to a consideration of public works on a territorial scale (SORIA, 1997; MATA, 2010; RODRIGUEZ *et al.*, 2010). Various authors, such as Miguel Aguiló, Ignacio Español, José María Coronado, and Francisco Javier Rodríguez Lázaro, have dealt with the relationships established between the road, the country it runs through, and the perceived landscape.

This work is conceived as the application of their theories to a real-life case: the local or tertiary road from Alzira to Favara (now the CV-510), particularly the first stretch of the project, ending in Corbera, built after 1864. It proposes to analyse the construction of this road as a historical process and its distinguishing features; explain its influence on the transformation of its environment; and evaluate the role it has played and continues to play in the perception and understanding of that environment. The study is based on the in situ observation of its route and its immediate surroundings. The documentation of the archive of the construction projects was also a fundamental element enabling a historical approach to the work. Finally, we interpret the information obtained in relation to the contributions of the literature consulted.

The discourse is structured around these objectives. First, we present the project of the road and its materialisation in its linear route and the main building work. In the second section, we analyse the role of the construction of this new road in the transformation of the environment and the formation of a new landscape, which coincided with a period of expansion of commercial orange growing, and the consolidation of the model of the bourgeois market garden. And finally, we approach the function of this route as a public space in the perception of the landscape of orange groves. Thanks to the adaptation of the terrain to its layout, and the maintenance of the secondary nature originally planned for it, the present-day road conserves its original values and relationship with the environment, with no substantial alterations.

## 2. THE PROJECT AND CONSTRUCTION OF THE ALZIRA - FAVARA ROAD

The project, dated 14 July 1862, was drafted by the architect José Zacarías Camaña y Burcet. This tertiary road was designed to run between the towns of Alzira and Favara, passing through Corbera and Llaurí, with a total length of 14,019 km. The project was divided into two sections for execution. The first would run from Alzira to Corbera, following a straighter east-west route. This would vary only when crossing the Vall-verd and Toll gullies, and to avoid a small hill in the middle of the route. The straight line desired for the new roads was the product of planning and order, and in a word, modernity, contrasting with the more irregular local lanes (MENÉNDEZ DE LUARCA, 2011). They also sought to adapt the route to the terrain as much as possible, in order to avoid the added costs of

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tree-felling, earthworks, and building work (CORONADO *et al.*, 2008). These two characteristics would have an aesthetic impact on the perception of the territory the road ran through, as analysed below.

The largest obstacle to be avoided was the course of the Vall-verd gully, where a brickwork bridge was planned. The other building work was not particularly significant, and made use of the various official models available, according to the needs of each case. The project was approved on 3 March 1863 and work began on 19 March 1864. Although we have not been able to obtain any documentation referring to its conclusion, different news items indicate that work continued for some time, and must have ended around 1880.

Over the years, there have been several interventions in this road, modernising it and adapting it to new needs emerging from the changes in vehicles and traffic. These interventions have slightly altered some of its characteristic features. The road as a whole remains acceptably legible.

### 3. THE ROAD AS A TRANSFORMATIVE ELEMENT OF ITS ENVIRONMENT

One of the characteristics of roads built in the 19th century was their adaptation to their environment, enabling them to integrate easily and be perceived as in a close relationship with it. Significant built heritage arose next to this road in particular, as it attracted use as soon as it was constructed (CORONADO, 2010, 153). Thus its cultural value is not only found in the road itself, but includes the territories it connects and the land adjacent to it, the elements of which are organised taking into account the presence of the new route (MENÉNDEZ DE LUCARCA *et al.*, 1994; CORONADO *et al.*, 2008).

At the time of its construction, the road ran through a dry landscape. The land around it began to be transformed beginning with the construction of the road, which coincided with the period of definitive expansion of oranges as a commercial crop. This process fostered changes in the structure of plot layouts, the alignment of planting schemas, internal path systems, etc., which all took the line of the road as a reference point and contributed to the formation of an interesting set of middle-class orange groves. Thus, an alien element superimposed on the existing distribution of plots would become integrated in its environment in just a few decades. This explains why this road is especially useful for examining and understanding this new landscape, which developed at the same time as the road was built, and cannot be explained without its presence.

Miguel Aguiló explains how, throughout the intervening period, the roads with noticeable intrinsic aesthetic qualities have generated a strong desire in the private sector to associate itself with this added value in the public sphere (AGUILÓ, 2010). While during the 18th century the land-owning aristocracy sought to establish a route between Alzira and Carcaixent as a privileged location for creating their orchards and market gardens, we can state that from the 1870s onwards the middle class or bourgeoisie, as the new land-owning class leading the agricultural expansion of Valencia, found this new road from Alzira to Corbera to be suitable for their purposes. The main bourgeois market gardens were concentrated in two stretches of the road: across the Pla de Montserrat area from Corbera to the Toll gully; and from the Vall-verd or Murta gully to the side-road to Forn de la Carrascosa. Considering the aesthetic dimension of the orchards, which goes hand-in-hand with their profitability, it is reasonable to think that these investments would be made in land offering the best conditions in relation to the new road. The line of the road marks the reference point for the composition, with all the architectural elements and plantations of the plot articulated around it.

The orange groves created next to the Alzira - Corbera road correspond to the type of bourgeois market garden which became standard around the 1870s. They occupy large plots with perimeter walls. The main change from the type of orchard we find along the Alzira - Carcaixent road can be seen in the typical house, which moves away from the edge of the plot to a roughly central position. Next to the house will be a motor and water tank for irrigation and a small ornamental garden. The house stands at the intersection of the two central axes around which the orchard is structured and the plantations laid out. The most striking element is the front path, connecting the exterior of the plot with the front door of the house. Meanwhile, the other pathways become part of a garden designed for strolling, adorned with ornamental plants. The traditional polyculture of the Valencian market garden

has been abandoned in favour of an orange-growing monoculture, where the plantations are aligned geometrically for greater economy and productivity. But the garden does not end with the decorative plants and designs of the inner pathways; it extends into the orange grove itself, which as well as its commercial purpose, retains aesthetic qualities reflecting the earlier ornamental use of the orange tree.

In the bourgeois orchard, the house becomes an important part of landscape design, rather than an architectural element. Its presence is the main visual marker of the garden, as it can be seen from outside via the straight front path, and it forms a striking contrast to the uniform green of the orange plantation. In many cases it is conceived as a construction for leisure, designed to enhance enjoyment of the landscape and to decorate it.

#### 4. THE PERCEPTION OF THE LANDSCAPE FROM THE ROAD

In the locations where orange-growing began, the territory shaped by a series of orchards combining plants and built elements acquires an intentionally aesthetic dimension. This meant that from the start, the area became a vast, productive garden where the ideas of beauty and profitability meet - in other words, a work of art which can be contemplated as such and generate an aesthetic experience (GRACIA, 1998, 48-50; 2004; MADERUELO, 2010).

The road is a linear public space which can give access to a private sphere through its contemplation. Hence, Miguel Aguiló remarks that roads make landscape possible by enabling access to the land (AGUILÓ, 2010). This scenic quality of roads is enhanced in this road by a series of elements relating to its conception, such as its avoidance of bends, its long, straight, level stretches, and its adaptation to the levels of the terrain, allowing for leisurely viewing at the pace of an animal-drawn vehicle. In the early 20th century, as cars became more common and traffic became faster, the same factors permitted a more relaxed driving style, facilitating the perception of the environment around the road during the journey (ESPAÑOL, 2007; AGUILÓ, 2010).

FIGURE 1  
Panoramics from the Alzira - Corbera road



Source: Photographs taken by the author.

The landscape of orange groves can be appreciated from several different viewpoints. For the owners of a plot, their land is framed by a walled perimeter preventing outside access. This is complemented by a panoramic view which lets them enjoy expansive and delightful scenes from various vantage points: lookout towers, roof terraces, or viewing points forming part of the surrounding garden (BESÓ, 2016, 318-320). But the perimeter wall limits the visual experience

which can be enjoyed by the owners of the orchard and their guests. From outside, there are only a few areas where the ground is high enough to offer such sweeping views, as most of the lanes are narrow and winding, or hemmed in by high walls, preventing us from seeing beyond our own path. Thus, the Alzira - Corbera road is an exceptional route, allowing access to the orchards from the public space.

The walls around it are always low, giving an uninterrupted view of the groves of green trees, punctuated by the many small houses, the plants in the surrounding gardens, the taller trees and palms lining the entrance paths, the sheds housing the motors, and in some cases, the brick chimneys that accompanied steam engines to power the water pumps, first installed from 1880. In the two stretches where most of the bourgeois orchards are concentrated, the continuity of the walls on either side of the road is broken only by their entrances. The front path, crossing the plot in a straight line to the house, appears as a transitional space between the public road and the private world of the orchard. The style of construction of the gate at the entrance gives it a stately, monumental character.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The same topographical conditions which favoured the integration of the road into the territory as soon as it was built have allowed it to continue virtually unchanged through the years. For this reason, it has a certain intrinsic heritage value as a surviving example of a 19th-century road type, characterised by its adaptation to the space, favouring its rapid integration into the territory. Thanks to these qualities, it meets many of the criteria for classification as a heritage element (CORONADO et al., 2010).

The immediate transformation of the surrounding land into orange groves contributed to this integration. The favourable conditions of this modern highway, very different from the other local roads, attracted new orchards in the bourgeois mould to both sides of the route. This transformation process would later be completed with the modification of the remaining plots of land, making the entire basin one endless orange grove as far as the eye can see. Without the presence of the road, the aesthetic quality of the landscape, heightened by the clusters of bourgeois orchards in some stretches, would not be possible.

This short stretch of road offers a high level of value as heritage, landscape, and an aesthetic whole, thanks to the twofold relationship between the road and its immediate surroundings, characterised by a dense concentration of orchards. All of these circumstances have made it an essential route of approach to an understanding of the orange grove landscape and its artistic values, created as part of the formation of bourgeois orchards in the 19th century, and reflecting the new ways of understanding socioeconomic relationships that were emerging in that period.

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