

CLOSED CYCLE: THE HERITAGE OF THE NOBILITY BUILT IN THE CITY OF MURCIA (SPAIN)

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For almost seven centuries the nobility of Murcia has been instrumental in the political and social life of the Region of Murcia and these families occupied streets of the old city of Murcia with their houses (palaces or palace-houses). This built heritage only rarely reaches the consideration of «monumental patrimony» and has not received special attention, with some recent exceptions, by the researchers, although preferably focused to religious buildings.

The homes of noble families in Murcia are a direct reflection of the economic vicissitudes of their owners, whose assets were mainly concentrated in large farmland, located largely in the areas of irrigation provided by the Segura River, upstream and below the city of Murcia. The profitability of agriculture in irrigated semi-arid area in the southeast of the Iberian Peninsula generates income that extensive drylands of the region are not able to guarantee by its random and low rainfall.

From the Christian conquest in the thirteenth century to the twentieth century, the nobility has accumulated a very important part of wealth in agricultural land, and their gradual disappearance generated in Murcia and its region a new phase, especially by the transfer of ownership produced between the years 1930-1960, which eventually erase the social and political role of the nobility of Murcia.

Although the great noble houses (Marquis of Los Vélez or Villena) leave the region soon and their influence quickly fades, other families start their development by creating small domains that generate large assets progressively, based on family and marital strategies in the institution «primogeniture». The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (especially the latter) are the culminating stage of aristocratic wealth and power in Murcia.

Absent the castle-residence in Murcia, noble residences are mainly urban, mostly corresponding to the aforementioned centuries. Usually these buildings have three floors with facades of brick and stone ornamentation on the facade and corners basically heraldic character. Its size and decoration are directly related to the economic capacity of their owners. For this reason the interest of the built heritage is very mixed, although overall it offers a great historical, cultural and urban wealth.

From the first half of the nineteenth century, the abolition of «primogeniture» starts the inevitable decline of these great estates, emphasizing the traditional difficulties that plagued these landowners: lack of liquidity and quick sales, use of loans, high taxes, and need to maintain the outward signs that prove the membership of this privileged class. According to several authors, the decline, decay and neglect of urban residence is significant in the late nineteenth century, but the final crisis began in the years before and after the Civil War, when the sale of land to their tenants and the inheritance division becomes progressively intense. In this way, the Murcia Orchard begins to become an area of small irrigated lands. The final blow to the traditional situation corresponds to the decade of 1980, when the expansion of new irrigated areas derived from the contributions of water from the Tagus River to the Segura River represents a strong competition to the products of traditional orchards and the survivors landowners have to adapt to the new situation or succumb.

The urban heritage of the nobility clearly reflects these circumstances. The palaces were abandoned or sold and the ruin of the great families who lived in them is clearly reflected in demolitions, changes of use or disrespectful in transformations of architectural and decorative elements that characterized them.

The absence of an urban policy in relation to this historical legacy has had varied effects, and a recovery efforts more or less fortunate have arrived late.

Many of these palatial houses or palaces have disappeared as a result of large urban operations, such as the opening of the street «Gran Vía Sculptor Salzillo». Others have been restored to government buildings for the needs of the new Regional Administration from the 1980's. Finally, the number of shipments of decorative items from demolished buildings at various sites is remarkable, some of these very far from their original location. In addition to these activities at issue, was reconstructed a access to a noble house for decorative purposes.

In synthesis, the recollection of a social class during long time protagonist of the life in the region seems to be disappearing, there being destroyed great part of the heritage constructed of the city of Murcia. Certainly, this is not strictly a heritage «monumental» but the historical, documentary, social and cultural wealth of those buildings that for centuries determined the urban landscape of Murcia would deserve, undoubtedly, major respect.