

Intervention in the Compromise of Caspe Castle

A Search of the Continuity

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Abstract

The restoration intervention was carried out in a key site in the formation of the Kingdom of Spain as a modern state. In 1412, the election of Ferdinand I as the new King of Aragon was signed in the Castle of Caspe. This agreement between the parliaments of Aragon, Catalonia and Valencia is known as the Compromise of Caspe.

In 2011 the Government of Aragon commissioned the drafting of a project to adapt the area known as the Hall of the Compromise and the adjoining Tower to enable its visit and use as an assembly hall. Due to the practical disappearance of the original elements, the intervention could not be approached as “restoration”, or “mere reconstruction of what has been destroyed, according to the form it had or should have had”.

The project configures a *stadkerone* on the remains of the ancient mediaeval “acropolis” that crowned the historic city. A light box on mediaeval structures in which the concrete walls, sober and heavy, support the light glass box: the Hall of the Compromise. Former continues and merges with the existing stone and rammed earth walls. The second is delimited by a dense grid of wooden beams that extend vertically along the facade in strict seriation—a project leitmotiv—extended to the white concrete itself, which exhibits a pronounced vertical texture resulting from the use of wooden formwork.

The research explores the relationship of the modern project with history and the sequence of design decisions—constructive and aesthetic—in the formation of the architectural object in parallel to the will to build the place in which it is inserted, with the establishment of a new order based on the remains of the past.

Keywords: Caspe Castle, Modern Intervention, Heritage

Historical context

In his pioneering publications on Gothic architecture and the castles of Aragon, the author Cristóbal Guitart already indicated the existence in the upper part of the city of Caspe of an interesting mediaeval “acropolis”, with religious, civil and military constructions. Of this complex, which includes among other buildings the church of Santa María la Mayor and the convent of the Military Order of San Juan, the castle of the same order stands out towards the banks of the Guadalupe River and is now known as the Castle of the Compromise.

During the Reconquista, this castle played an important defensive role in accordance with Caspe’s border location, until around 1169 when it ceased to be used as a palace, from where the lordly exploitation was exercised.



Fig. 1. Compromise of Caspe Castle (Juan Carlos Gil, 2012)

Undoubtedly, the signing of the Compromise Act in 1412, by which representatives of the parliaments of Aragon, Valencia, and Catalonia elected a new king, Ferdinand I, for the Crown of Aragon, was the historical event that marked Caspe. And also the castle, since all studies indicate that this important act took place in one of its halls, and for this reason, it has long been known as the Castle of the Compromise. Then the restoration intervention is carried out in a key site in the formation of the Kingdom of Spain as a modern state. Without delving into the building's historical context, after that important event, the castle continued to fulfill its function as a representation of local power and a defense of the territory. It is precisely this defensive role that has shaped the building's history, since it has been the target of various conflicts, with defensive structures being reduced to ruins on several occasions.

Situation of the Castle before the Intervention

This turbulent military history, already mentioned, explains why the remains of the mediaeval castle that has survived to the present day are truly scarce, and to some extent altered by the addition of later structures, such as the old courthouse, built adjoining the north and northwest ends of the Tower. The castle's current appearance, arranged in a series of terraced levels overlooking the Guadalupe River cliff, is largely the result of an intervention carried out in the 1970s. We owe this intervention that some elements of interest were preserved, elements that might otherwise have been lost.

At the beginning of the 21st century, for over ten years, the team led by architects Joaquín Soro and Roberto Benedicto and their collaborators has carried out complex consolidation work on the underground levels and cellars of the castle, as well as important historical documentation work on the building.

The remains we found consist primarily of a ruined central space, corresponding to the Hall of Compromise, flanked by two towers: at the north end, the main tower, quadrangular in plan and incomplete in height, retains two-pointed arches in fair condition; and at the south end, a recently constructed circular tower. The Hall, now devoid of walls, a roof, or a covering, and with the natural, uneven ground serving as its floor, exhibits only a jamb and the beginning of a lintel that remains recognizable from one of the windows that once adorned the hall's façade facing the collegiate church, as evidenced by existing engravings. The foundation of both the Hall and the main Tower is maintained, consisting of a scarp, slope or embankment, which is partially hidden by the building that housed the old courts.

The Intervention Project

In 2011, to commemorate the six hundred anniversaries of this event, the Government of Aragon commissioned Cerouno Arquitectos (Alfaro/de la Cal/Labarta/Oliván) to draft a project to adapt the area known as the Hall of the Compromise and the adjoining Tower to enable its visit and use as an assembly hall.

Due to the practical disappearance of the original elements previously mentioned, the intervention could not be approached as either "restoration", or "mere reconstruction of what has been destroyed, according to the form it had or should have had".

Therefore, we face the need to enable the Hall, not so much as the formal recovery of a space with certain characteristics, but as the action of delimiting and preserving a place where one of the most important agreements in our history took place, especially because of the triumph of dialogue over conflict, and sheltering it under a construction worthy of the event. In this way, the adaptation of the Hall will allow visitors to access the place where the Commitment was signed, to enjoy the surroundings seen by those who signed it; and, above all, to communicate the spirit of the Agreement. To achieve this, architecture must provide the material framework that enables this new function, with appropriate proportions, through the introduction of materials that distinguish the new construction from the existing structure.

Using the castle as a cultural space for the city of Caspe will breathe new life into the building. In this regard, we recall the reflections of Leopoldo Torres Balbás (1888-1960), the architect who served as curator of the Alhambra and the Generalife, and whose rigorous and sensitive work brought an end to the tradition of fanciful and destructive restorations of previous decades:

«In some monuments, it may be absolutely necessary to carry out new work to prevent their destruction. In such cases, the natural and logical approach is to do this work with modern materials and in a modern style, as has always been done until our times of restoration (...)»

A primary consideration for public use areas is to ensure structural safety. The castle complex is situated on a sandstone promontory, a rock of considerable strength but marked by extensive fracturing. This fracturing is attributable in part to the presence of stratification planes and in part to erosion resulting from water infiltration into the building and the surrounding terrain. These phenomena have led to the detachment of some internal sections, creating several cavities with a high risk of collapse.

The fragmentation of the entire rocky base, in conjunction with the potential existence of cavities, renders it impossible to guarantee an adequate surface support level for the new floors and roofs. Therefore, the current intervention has opted for a foundation using

concrete micropiles. The structural integrity of the Tower is maintained by a reinforced concrete framework encircling its interior perimeter, akin to a corset, which is further supported by the aforementioned micropiles.

The Planned Work

The intervention focuses on three main areas: the access volume, the Hall of Compromise, and the Tower. To facilitate access to the castle, a new structure is planned, attached to the adjacent residential building on its southern edge. This new addition comprises a staircase and an elevator, ensuring complete accessibility from the lower level to the Hall of Compromise, located approximately 7 meters above the base of the castle. This new structure is developed across three distinct levels, which we will designate as lower, middle, and upper. From the lower level, direct access to the elevator is possible via an old lintel archway adorned with coats of arms—which archaeological experts have recommended preserving in its likely original location—and through a section of exterior stairs that connects to the landing of a recently discovered stone ramp-staircase. From this intermediate level, one can access, via the interior of the new structure, the upper level, that of the Hall of Compromise and the Tower. The Hall of Compromise is devoid of both exterior walls, a walkable floor, and a roof. To adapt this space, a new volume is designed with a roof featuring a dense network of wooden beams that then extend vertically along the facades as a vertical structure composed of resistant metal profiles covered with maple wood resistant to the external environment. This structure creates a recognizable volume with its own distinct character, thus conveying its significance within the complex. This serialization of the vertical structure is the leitmotif of the project and extends to the metal defenses and the white concrete itself, which blends with the existing remains, exhibiting a pronounced vertical texture left by the wooden plank formwork. Furthermore, archaeological excavations have uncovered a Roman-era cistern located next to the circular tower, which has been incorporated into the interior of the Hall, adding spaciousness and interest to this historic space. About the tower, the project reconstructs part of its lost height on the exterior, using colored reinforced concrete walls that continue the existing rammed earth and other material surfaces. Inside, two-pointed arches, which were deteriorated at their keystones and partially hidden by various old partitions, have been restored. An intermediate floor is constructed in the tower, made with a wooden structure and positioned above the arches, respecting the stone projections that may have supported a completely lost original floor. Regarding cladding and finishes, all roofs are covered with zinc trays. On the walls, cement mortar from joints, coatings, and re-layers from previous interventions has been removed due to its damaging effect on the stone (excessive hardness, salt accumulation, etc.). After cleaning, the joints were repointed with lime mortar lightly colored with pigments or natural earth pigments, with flush joints. In areas of stone blocks that require reconstruction or replacement, this is done with rubble masonry and/or sandstone blocks like those utilized in the castle.

The Will to Preserve and the Idea of Continuity

The project configures a *stadkrone* on the remains of the ancient mediaeval “acropolis” that crowned the historic city. A light box on mediaeval structures in which the concrete walls, sober and heavy, support the light glass box that houses the Hall of the Compromise. The



Fig. 2. Hall of Compromise. Caspe Castle (Juan Carlos Gil, 2012)

research explores the relationship of the modern project with history and the sequence of design decisions - constructive and aesthetic - in the formation of the architectural object in parallel to the will to build the place in which it is inserted, with the establishment of a new order founded on the remains of the past.

The project substantially addresses the issue of our relationship with history. How can we respond with an architecture of our time? Even understanding history as continuous, respecting the legacy of the past and complementing it, if necessary, we must not shy away from proposing alternative architectural approaches. In the contemporary context, the adoption of an iconoclastic stance is challenging to comprehend when confronted with a prevalent aspiration to forge a disciplinary connection with the past that does not merely entail a replication of prevailing models.

The architectural education of the present authors was overseen by their mentor, Javier Carvajal, who introduced the concept of fidelity to one's own time, as the only way to contribute to the evolution of history. This remains clearly etched in the minds of all of us who were his students. Far from serving history with false, mimetic, or pastiche-like attitudes, so common during our time as students, the best guarantee of enduring legacy lies in the profound response posed by contiguity with a new language, and even more so, with a new way of conceiving the form of space derived from abandoning mimesis. Thus, Javier Carvajal states that "history should be understood more as space than as time, architecturally speaking. The architect's time is his own, the present, the one that accompanies him. Space is what he acts upon. History is the wound of time upon space. And it is that space that remains wounded, that has its own history, upon which the architect, with his project, with his time, acts."

This aspect of architecture as a framework for the project is crucial when defining a

restoration or intervention, even when the scope of the work extends beyond the building itself and into the urban environment. Both approaches are complementary, and perhaps only the scale and nature of the project can justify the greater use of one or the other.

Architecture and design are a matter of boundaries, and therefore of the appropriate relationship between all the elements that condition and enliven them. This relationship should not imply contextualism and fragmented expression in the presence of historical architecture, simply because problems of representation and objectification must be avoided; nor should the understanding of architecture be considered a new question of morphology, but rather a problem of syntax where the idea of completion instantly becomes a basic reference point in the face of the conceptual difficulties of contemporary architecture. In any case, establishing a conceptual historical continuity is not enough to guarantee the effectiveness of the insertions. Consequently, it is necessary to evaluate each phenomenon within its own limits, so that generic historical or cultural references must be individualized and adapted to the specific case.

Modern Project and Historical Setting

Modern architecture has been analysed as autistic with respect to its environment. It seems, or is assumed, that this architecture lacks the capacity to address the conditions of the environment in which it is situated. We have already discussed in the previous section how, in relation to the natural or urban environment, the true condition of modernity involves the construction of place. The modern building cannot be considered a delimited and finished object in itself; rather, it achieves its true specificity in relation to its surroundings, extending its influence beyond its physical boundaries. This has been addressed in some of Professor Piñón's classes as the reverberating capacity of modern form. He explains it thus: "The modern building has an administrative boundary that does not usually coincide with its spatial limit: in fact, the relationships that define it are only exhausted where the eye can no longer reach. Therefore, the modern building, more than a delimited and concluded object, is, by definition, an urban episode: either because the building is conceived as a peculiar universe that engages with the environment through its position—Le Corbusier —, or because architecture itself is conceived as a way of inhabiting the world, with no barriers other than those determined by protection and climate control—Mies van der Rohe."

These buildings embrace history, just as they do their program. And their response to history is by no means circumstantial or simply based on a principle of continuity. The established relationship is based on responding to their own time, on fidelity to it, without false historicism, without pretensions of expressing history. Javier Carvajal often referred to this fidelity as the only way to endure through time. By being faithful to the specific historical moment, the work contributes to its continued relevance. All of this has been explained clearly and intensely in Helio Piñón's aforementioned Theory of the Project, in which he contributes the concept of historicity: "The work of architecture—of art in general—is conceived within a specific historical framework that offers the author a series of theoretical, artistic, and material tools, the choice of which influences the meaning of the work: awareness of the historicity of the conception will affect this choice, among other factors. The adoption of one attitude or another toward technique and form, but also toward the role of the architect and success depends on the author's self-image, the

historical period in which they work, and their role in the artistic production of that period. Ultimately, the historicity of architecture depends on how the author interprets the meaning of history and decides to act in relation to it.”

The resonances of Javier Carvajal’s teachings regarding how architecture faithful to its historical moment can endure are clearly expressed in the aforementioned book: “Thus, one arrives at the conclusion—which some may consider paradoxical—that for architecture to acquire relevance over time, it must embrace its own historicity—which links it to a specific historical moment—since only in this way will it achieve the quality that characterizes works of art. This relevance, therefore, in no way diminishes its connection to the values of its time; on the contrary, it relates to the capacity to incorporate them in a synthetic and consistent form, so that the formal structure can resonate within the vault of historical time.” I believe there is no clearer way to put it. And this is achieved precisely through the quality of the work, insofar as it is linked to criteria of universality.

In this project, we have sought to draw upon the ruins of the past to inform our intervention. The affirmation of our own time is also determined by the choice of materials and their relationship to history, whether in continuity or in gentle counterpoint. Consequently, the concrete walls engage in a dialogue with the extant stone walls. And the lightness of the glass box perched atop the walls of this small “acropolis” discreetly completes the silhouette of the city of Caspe.



Fig. 3. Courtyard. Caspe Castle

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