

Bullrings Roofing in Spain

Functional Solutions for a Heritage Future

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the incorporation of roofs in historic bullrings in Spain as functional strategies to ensure their preservation as architectural heritage and extend their use beyond bullfighting. Since the end of the twentieth century, significant cases have been developed: Santa Cruz de Tenerife (1986), Zaragoza (1990), Pontevedra (1996), Tarragona (2008), and Villena (2011). The study demonstrates how various technical solutions—ranging from textile to glass or retractable to fixed—enable these buildings to operate as year-round multipurpose venues, overcoming the climatic limits of their roofless typology. These cases contrast with Las Arenas in Barcelona (2011). Its radical facadism intervention, designed by architects Richard Rogers and Alonso Balaguer for the sake of preserving the architectural values of its Neo-Mudejar style, constitutes an extreme example of adaptive reuse. Its interior was integrally emptied to transform the building into a modern shopping center within a political and social context in Catalonia that had turned against bullfighting. The growing challenge to bullfighting from animal-rights debates frames the broader objective of this paper. It reflects on roofing solutions as a conservation tool in view of their heritage future, considering criteria of compatibility of uses and explicitness of alteration as key factors in securing the survival of this uniquely versatile architectural type.

Keywords: Bullrings, Roofing, Heritage

Introduction

Between 2005 and 2011, the studio of high-tech pioneer architect Richard Rogers (Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners, RSHP), in collaboration with Alonso Balaguer i Arquitectes Associats (ABAA), transformed the Barcelona's bullring of Las Arenas into a shopping center. Of the building designed in 1899–1900 by August Font i Carreras, only the brick facade, inspired by the Mosque of Córdoba, was preserved. This project represents a paradigmatic case of refunctionalization, in which the bullfighting use was replaced by commercial and leisure functions. A transformation that, as analyzed by Martín Checa Artasu (2009), also operated as a political instrument.

Since its inauguration, Las Arenas has hosted political rallies, film screenings, sporting events, and a variety of spectacles—equestrian, musical, circus, and folkloric, among others—until the 1980s, while the last *corrida* was held on June 19, 1977. The building's subsequent deterioration triggered a local and regional political debate about its future, including the controversial proposal of demolition. ADITAC (Association for the Defense of Bullfighting Traditions of Catalonia) filed a legal appeal to halt this plan, and the Superior

Court of Justice of Catalonia ordered preserving at least the facade for its architectural and historical values. Las Arenas is inscribed in Neo-Mudejar revival, which was popular across Spain, Portugal, and South America from the 1870s until the mid-twentieth century (Santos Muñoz 2025, 9–10).

After a lengthy process, Las Arenas was expropriated by the Barcelona City Council in 1997 and listed as a protected building in 1998. In 1999 it was acquired by the company Nueva Plaza de Toros de Barcelona SL, which commissioned RSHP and ABAA in 2000 to design a leisure complex. The project was presented in 2002 at the real estate fair Barcelona Meeting Point (Checa Artasu 2009). While the original facade was preserved and suspended in air by large pillars to act as a "skin" (Baz 2010), the interior was entirely dismantled. The new structure includes four underground parking levels. At the lower and intermediate levels, two shopping areas, twelve cinemas, and a gym. Crowning the building is a domed roof with a 360° panoramic terrace and restaurants, accessible directly from the street (Fig. 1). An adjacent building, the E-Forum, was added for complementary uses, aligned with Ildefons Cerdà's urban grid (1859–1860).



Fig. 1. Las Arenas, Barcelona (author, 2025)

The transformation of the former bullring into the Centre Comercial Arenas de Barcelona, inaugurated on March 25, 2011, coincided with the political debate over the prohibition of bullfighting in Catalonia. Initiated through a Popular Legislative Initiative (ILP), anti-bullfighting groups succeeded in achieving a ban by the Catalan Parliament with the approval of *Llei 28/2010, del 3 d'agost*, a law that came into effect in January 2012. However, the Constitutional Court of Spain declared the law unconstitutional in *Sentencia 177/2016, de 20 de octubre*, although bullfighting never returned to Catalan arenas (Codina Segovia 2018, 204–206). In parallel, another ILP, this time promoted by pro-bullfighting groups at a national level, led to the recognition of bullfighting as part of Spain's cultural heritage. The conservative government of Mariano Rajoy (2011–2016) granted it the highest level of protection through *Ley 18/2013, de 12 de noviembre*, regulating it as Cultural Heritage of Spain. By contrast, during Pedro Sánchez's third term (2023–present), the progressive coalition government formed by PSOE and Sumar appointed Ernest Urtasun (from the

Catalunya en Comú party, integrated within Sumar) as Minister of Culture. Urtasun has openly defended an anti-bullfighting and animal-rights stance (Ramón 2024): *«hay una mayoría de españoles que no comparte el maltrato animal»*¹, and in 2024 abolished the National Bullfighting Award granted by his own ministry. The lack of interest is evident in the latest survey made by the Spanish Ministry of Culture about cultural practices (División de Estadística y Estudios 2025, 493–503): attendance at bullfighting has lost almost 20% of its audience in the year 2024–2025 compared to 2006–2007.

Objective: Resignifying Bullfighting Space

The bold intervention in Las Arenas, taking place alongside Catalonia's anti-bullfighting socio-political context, serves as a starting point for reflecting on the partial conservation of its aesthetic values and on the heritage future of bullfighting architecture through the roofing of the arenas. The next examples will show how this functional solution extends their use beyond the traditional spring-to-autumn bullfighting season.

Since their emergence as an architectural typology in the mid-eighteenth century—shaped by Enlightenment thinking and a growing rejection of bullfights within city centers—bullrings have hosted a variety of non-bullfighting uses, not so different from today. The introduction of roofs, from the late twentieth century onwards, has diminished the primacy of the *corridos*. Although paradigmatic, Las Arenas represents the extreme of adaptive reuse: a building conceived for contemplative leisure transformed into a space of consumption. Following James Douglas (2006: 98), the installation of roofs can be understood as providing a dual functionality—bullfighting and non-bullfighting—each requiring significant internal modifications and specific spatial, functional, and structural adjustments. Added to the upper ring, such interventions demand reform, restoration, or structural reinforcement. They also require improvements to capacity, services, facilities, and acoustic insulation, in order to meet the criteria of "compatibility of use" and "explicitness of alteration" for the conservation of historic buildings (Douglas 2006, 114). Non-bullfighting activities therefore remain consistent with the building's original contemplative character, while the alteration is evident through its contemporary technological features. This is not the case with Las Arenas, where the contemplative function has disappeared entirely.

In a context in which bullfighting is losing social legitimacy, Liliang Wong's notion of obsolescence becomes relevant (2023, 15): the bullring is no longer useful, or its original purpose has lost meaning. The objective, therefore, is to reflect on its heritage future within the framework of adaptive reuse, exploring roofing solutions marked by the disincentive to bullfighting and the consequent resignification by multipurpose activities. As Beatriz Santamarina says: *«¿Hay un espacio en el mundo que haya sido tan polivalente? [...] ¿Es posible encontrar un aforo tan heterogéneo y tan democráticamente compartido?»* (2022, 20)².

Roofing Begins in Historic Bullrings

The bullring of Santa Cruz de Tenerife was built in 1892 in Neo-Mudejar style by Antonio Pintor Ocete. It was the first in Spain to feature a roof, although only of an ephemeral character, conceived as a solution based on metal structures and awnings. Designed by Carlos A. Schwartz in 1985–1986, the project was justified by the bullring's long-standing use for a variety of events, from Canarian folk festivals and wrestling matches to concerts. The hosting of such events, including the island's renowned Carnival, gradually replaced

bullfighting itself due to the lack of local enthusiasm for the practice (Schwartz 1986, 13). The final design of the metal structure consisted of an octagon with eight trusses and service walkways along each pillar of the vertices, covering the eighty-meter diameter of the arena. From the trusses extended 256 steel cables attached to a reinforced concrete ring built atop the bullring's perimeter wall. These cables supported sixty-four movable polyester awnings arranged across three levels: thirty-two units measuring 3.94×18 meters on the upper level and sixteen units of 4.68×26.25 meters on both the intermediate and lower levels. The main area of the metal structure was covered by nine fixed awnings (Schwartz 1986 17–18). Today, the bullring stands abandoned, with the remnants of the structure still in place, awaiting rehabilitation.

Chronologically, the next bullring to be fitted with a roof that is still fully operational today is the Coso de la Misericordia in Zaragoza. Eighteenth-century politician Ramón Pignatelli commissioned it with the enlightened aim of promoting the city's progress and reducing poverty. Appointed by King Carlos II as Regent of the Real Casa de Misericordia of Zaragoza, Pignatelli saw the bullring as a means to raise funds for the institution through bullfighting events. In 1858, management of the arena was transferred to the Provincial Council of Zaragoza, which initiated several renovations. The most significant occurred in 1916 under architects Miguel Ángel Navarro Pérez and Manuel Martínez de Ubago, who redesigned the interior and exterior to give the building a new classicist facade.

The next major intervention affected the interior space. As in the case of Santa Cruz de Tenerife, between 1988 and 1990 a semi-permanent plastic roof made of polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE) was installed. It combined a movable section over the arena and a fixed one above the upper stands. The initiative came from the leaseholder of the bullring since 1986, the entrepreneur Arturo Beltrán, through the company Servicios Taurinos SA. His ambitious proposal sought to make the building suitable not only for bullfights but also for other events unaffected by adverse weather conditions (Yeste Navarro 2014, 131).

Provincial architect José María Valero Suárez devised a roof inspired by Roman amphitheaters. In a symbolic return to the ancient city of Caesar Augusta, the modern arena received a contemporary version of the *velarium*. This canopy extends from the facade cornice to a central ring, supported by masts and tension cables that allow the roof to open and close. The German architects Schlaich Bergermann und Partner, renowned for their work on the roof of Berlin's Olympic Stadium in 1972, were selected for the engineering design. Valero oversaw the works, which involved demolishing part of the old roof to construct a new brick wall reinforced with concrete ties and sixty-four small pillars supporting a steel ring. On this ring rested both the fixed and movable roof systems.

Inaugurated on October 7, 1990, during the Our Lady of the Pillar celebrations, the intervention was highly praised for its lightweight design, achieved through the use of cables and translucent fabric. It was also recognized for its visual discretion in concealing structural elements, operational simplicity, minimal maintenance requirements, and flexibility and speed in covering the arena either partially or completely (Yeste Navarro 2014, 134).

Historic and Contemporary in Contrast

Externally, Zaragoza's discreet roof contrasts sharply with Pontevedra's one, where the dialogue between old and new architecture is more explicit. Built in 1899–1900, architect

Siro Borrajo Montenegro designed a simple building with a low stone base, an upper brick body articulated by semicircular openings, and bricks highlighting the main structural lines. Owned by the company Lozano Martínez, the roofing project formed part of an improvements program initiated in January 1995. Architect Alfonso Barreiro Buján proposed covering the stands, seating areas, and part of the arena with a translucent metal sheet. He also suggested adding an upper brick enclosure above the original facade. This enclosure, designed with multiple semicircular arches echoing the historical aesthetic, was intended to conceal the new roof's supporting structure. However, the Official College of Architects of Galicia (COAG) initially rejected the proposal. Because the building was listed for its environmental and architectural values, any modification of the facade—the principal element to preserve—was prohibited. Then, internal renovation works without the roof were authorized, though in January 1996 the Pontevedra Council reversed its position and approved the full project (Barreiro Buján 1995).

The roof, inaugurated on July 25, 1996, in Saint James the Apostle feast coinciding with Galicia's National Day, was built with the additional upper ring made of concrete mixed with the decorative exposed brick that concealed the metal supports of the structure. Designed by FHECOR, the roof consists of a white PVC textile membrane conceived as a shell-like structure in the form of a truncated spherical dome with 69 meter and a central oculus of 25 meters.

At the beginning of the new millennium, the transformation of the Tarragona bullring, the current Caixabank Tarraco Arena, exemplifies the direction taken by adaptive reuse: multifunctionality. The original construction, designed by Ramón Salas i Ricomà between 1883–1888, was characterized by a functionality inherent to its bullfighting use and by being one of the first major works of Modernism in the city. Its exterior appearance combines stone and brick in arches and decorative details, resembling the Pontevedra bullring but with a more ornamental character. Owned by Tarragona Provincial Council since the 1940s, it was renovated through the decades and roofed to become a multipurpose building.

On December 10, 2001, the Provincial and City Councils signed an agreement with this goal, aiming to extend the building's use beyond the bullfighting season. On October 15, 2004, FHECOR was commissioned to design the roof under the direction of provincial architect Jaume Mutlló i Pamies³. The roof was conceived as a mixed fixed-and-mobile structure (Fig. 2), allowing both bullfighting and other large-scale events such as concerts, sports competitions, and the traditional *castells*—human tower contests. As detailed in the project description, the adaptive reuse entailed a thorough renovation of the building, repairing structural pathologies, such as humidity from capillarity and rainwater infiltration, and restoring the facade. Interior facilities were upgraded in safety, lighting, fire protection, temperature control, signage, and acoustic insulation. Seats were improved for comfort, accessibility, and visibility. Former bullfighting areas such as corrals were renovated, while new complementary buildings were added to support other events, including offices, storage areas, and dressing rooms (Mutlló i Pamies 2005).

The inner diameter of the arena measures 78 meters and is covered by a fixed metal-sheet structure based on Schwedler geometries, spanning 92.40 meters. At its center, a forty-meter-wide opening accommodates a mobile roof divided into two segments, featuring a laminated glass oculus of ten meters in diameter. The mobile system operates by a rack and pinion system, enabling the linear displacement of the two segments over the fixed



Fig. 2. Caixabank Tarraco Arena, Tarragona (author, 2025)

roof. This intervention, markedly contemporary in contrast with the nineteenth-century aesthetics of the original building, is supported by twenty-four reinforced concrete pillars. These are embedded within the facade wall and connected to the upper section of the original roof through a peripheral metal ring.

Finally, the Villena bullring, in Alicante province, represents a case in which the protection of the historic building led to a prolonged local political conflict, lasting from its acquisition by the City Council in 1999 until the inauguration of the new roof on April 10, 2011. The bullring, built in a Neo-Mudejar style by architect Julio Carrilero in 1923–1924, features a masonry facade richly punctuated by pointed horseshoe arches and a monumental horseshoe entrance. By the 1990s, the building was in serious disrepair, and a 2001 feasibility study deemed restoration unviable if limited solely to bullfighting use, proposing instead its conversion into a leisure or commercial complex. At the same time, sections of the facade and seating collapsed. César López Hurtado has documented the intense political debate surrounding the building's future (2011, 130–134), revealing its major influence on local electoral cycles and the alternation of right-wing (PP) and left-wing (PSOE) governments amid further partial collapses up to 2005.

Municipal architect Julio Roselló Serrano designed the restoration and roofing project in November 2007. The proposal sought to adapt the structure to a renewed use, whether for bullfighting, performances, exhibitions, or restaurants. This was achieved by installing a dual roof system over the 51-meter-diameter arena. The design consists of an annular, mobile, opaque roof above the upper ring and a higher, fixed, geodesic glass dome at the center (Fig. 3). The project also included a glass pyramid building connected to a car park, along with the enhancement of the surrounding urban environment (Roselló Serrano 2007).

Conclusion

The cases reviewed here encourage reflection on adaptive reuse as a tool for heritage conservation, particularly as bullfighting faces a potential end due to its declining social legitimacy. The radical transformation of Las Arenas enters into dialogue with more



Fig. 3. Plaza Plurifuncional, Villena (author, 2024)

balanced interventions such as those of Santa Cruz de Tenerife, Zaragoza, Pontevedra, Tarragona, and Villena. These examples demonstrate how roofing solutions can sustain a dual bullfighting and non-bullfighting function; yet, while this duality was initially maintained, certain cases of Santa Cruz de Tenerife or Tarragona prioritized uses detached from animal abuse.

Undoubtedly, this process constitutes an exercise in the resignification of the bullfighting space, preserving at the same time its recognized architectural and heritage values. The traces of a violent past—an evident manifestation of historical memory—can coexist with a contemporary ethical commitment to animal protection. Such transformations achieve functional adaptation to present-day sensibilities without erasing the building's architectural identity.

Notes

1. Author's translation: «there is a majority of Spaniards who do not support animal abuses».
2. Author's translation: «Is there a space in the world that has been so multipurpose? [...] Is it possible to find a venue so heterogeneous and so democratically shared?».
3. I would like to thank Jaume Mutlló Pamies and David Gatell Anglès for providing me with the text of this project and accompanying me during my visit to the Tarraco Arena.

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