

Proyecto de Rehabilitación de la Cárcel de Mujeres (1883) de Alcalá de Henares, antiguo Colegio-Convento de los Carmelitas Descalzos para Colegio Mayor Universitario

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Reimagining the relationship between
contemporary communities and historical
material and immaterial heritage

Abstract

This paper investigates how historical models of communal architecture—such as the Corralas and Corrales de Comedias—can inform contemporary approaches to urban regeneration through a spatial understanding grounded in social interaction and transformation. Drawing on the theories of Henri Lefebvre, Richard Sennett, Rafael Moneo, Aldo Rossi, Jan Gehl, Jane Jacobs, and Kevin Lynch, the research explores how architecture operates as a living, performative framework shaped by everyday use, memory, and collective presence. These insights converge in the case of La Galera in Alcalá de Henares, a disused women’s prison marked by complex historical layers. Here, the project embraces the transformative potential of adaptive reuse—not by replicating historical forms, but by translating their spatial intelligence into contemporary design strategies. Ultimately, the work positions communal space as a platform for social negotiation and urban continuity—where memory and use shape new architectural possibilities.

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1. Methodological Approach and Main Questions

What if the historical typological actors that shaped the Corrales de Comedias were reimaged to inform the creation of contemporary communal spaces?

How can the performative and collective memory of Corrales de Comedias inform the design of hybrid and flexible spaces capable of rebuilding social relationships in fragmented urban contexts?

This research unfolds through a sequence of interrelated investigations, each contributing to a broader understanding of how historical spatial models can inform contemporary strategies for urban regeneration. The methodology combines historical analysis, theoretical reflection, archival research, and site-specific interpretation, moving fluidly between architectural precedent, conceptual framing, and spatial speculation.

The first part of the work focuses on the Corralas and Corrales de Comedias, examining their architectural forms and the social practices they enabled. These case studies are not approached simply as historical references, but as living typologies capable of offering insight into the design of shared and adaptable urban spaces. Special attention is given to their performative character, communal logic, and ability to shift between private and public uses.

The second part introduces key theoretical frameworks that inform the reading and reinterpretation of these models. The work of thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre, Richard Sennett, Aldo Rossi, and Jane Jacobs provides the conceptual tools to understand space as dynamic, participatory, and embedded in everyday life. These theories are used not in abstract, but in direct dialogue with architectural observations, supporting a methodology that remains grounded in material and spatial realities.

The third part turns to the specific context of Alcalá de Henares, and more precisely to the site of La Galera. Here, the historical and theoretical insights developed in the earlier sections are used as lenses through which to read the building and its potential. La Galera is not treated as a blank slate, but as a layered artifact whose architectural memory can be activated through new forms of collective use. The analysis considers the site's current condition, historical transformations, and its symbolic role within the city.

The final part offers a discussion and conclusion that synthesizes the insights gathered across the study. Rather than arriving at a fixed solution, the aim is to articulate a design attitude—one that embraces ambiguity, prioritizes spatial openness, and reclaims architecture's role in shaping community. The proposed methodology is therefore iterative and reflective, allowing theory, history, and design to inform one another in the pursuit of adaptive and inclusive spatial strategies.

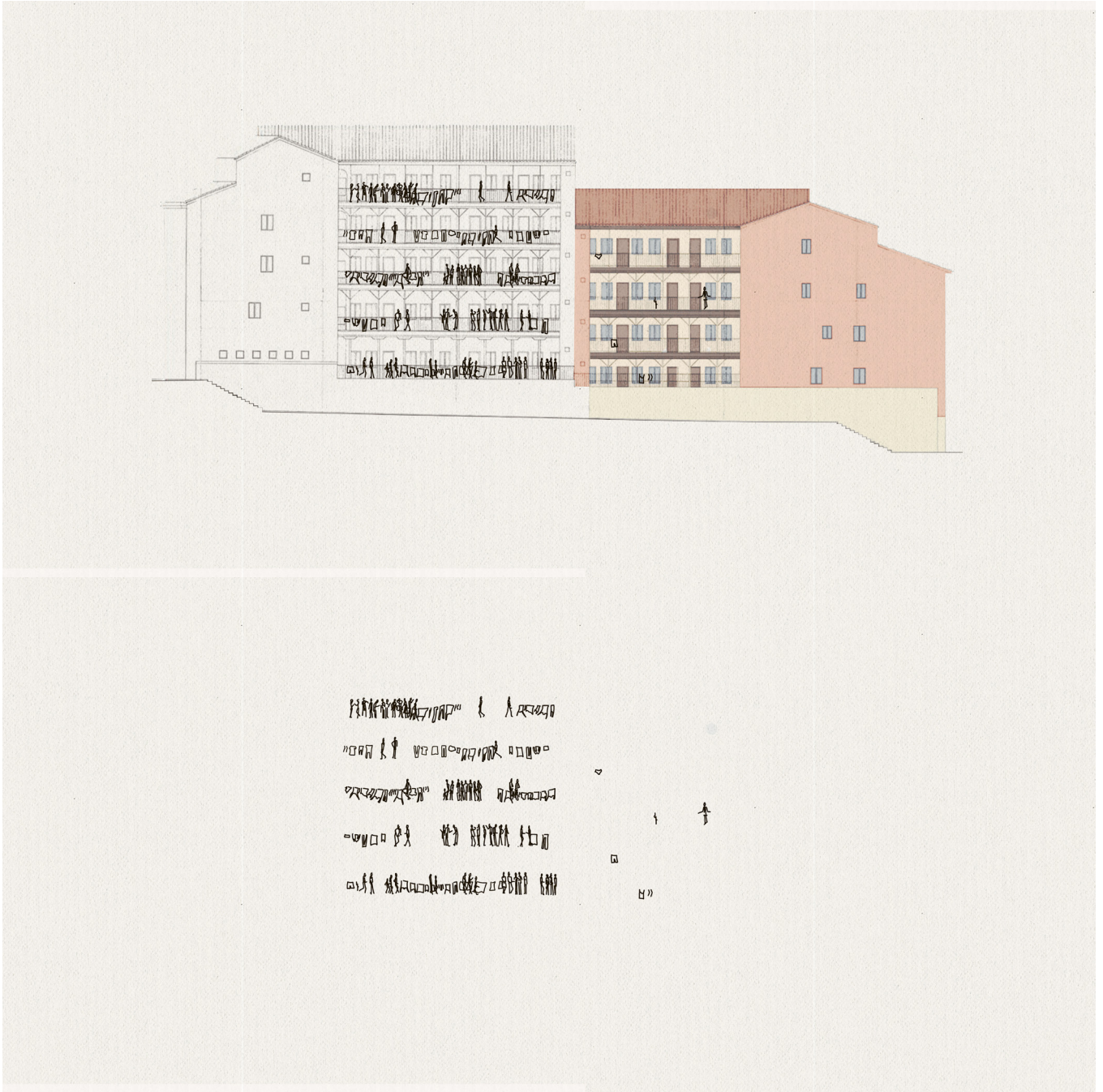


Fig.1 Redrawing of the Corrala de Sombrerete, illustrating its historical use and its current state of non-use through a visual scheme

2. Challenges in Modern Urban Design and Lessons from Historical Models

Modern urban design in rapidly expanding cities often prioritizes efficiency and spatial compartmentalization, which leads to fragmented environments that isolate individuals and weaken social cohesion. This shift towards efficiency diminishes opportunities for spontaneous interactions, fostering a sense of disconnection within urban communities (Fig. 1). As Gehl highlights, this trend towards compartmentalization in urban spaces often results in social isolation by focusing on privatized areas and neglecting communal spaces, where social interaction can thrive.¹

Architectural typologies such as the Corralas offer valuable historical insights for addressing these challenges. These structures show how shared spatial configurations can support multiple functions—including residential living, cultural engagement, and communal gatherings—fostering social bonds and enriching urban life. Their relevance lies not only in their physical design but also in their capacity for flexibility and dynamic social interaction.

Efforts to reintroduce communal living often replicate the physical layouts of historical models without fully embracing the adaptability and social dynamics that animated these spaces. By contrast, the original Corralas and Corrales de Comedias demonstrate how design can successfully balance private, semi-public, and public domains, creating spaces that support resilient and interconnected communities. These environments evolved over time, adapting to meet the changing needs of their users while maintaining a balance between individual and collective life.

By revisiting these historically adaptive models, this research aims to identify strategies for mitigating the fragmentation of contemporary urban spaces and creating environments where privacy and shared experiences coexist harmoniously. This study does not aim to replicate the formal typologies of Corralas or Corrales de Comedias, but rather to reinterpret their performative and collective ethos through a more dispersed, relational approach to urban design. In this framework, the site of La Galera in Alcalá de Henares—an underused heritage structure located between two major archival institutions—emerges as a strategic setting. The project speculates on how memory and community can be reactivated through subtle interventions that prioritize connection over construction, proposing an architecture that links knowledge, space, and public life.

1. Gehl, J. *Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space*, 2011.



Fig.2 Timeline showing the evolution of the qualities of the Corrala typology, their disappearance in the present, and the possibility of reintroducing them.

3. Position and Relevance

This research arises from a desire to reinterpret vernacular architectural models not just as formal references, but as dynamic spatial and cultural strategies that foster community, continuity, and shared urban life. The Corralas and Corrales de Comedias—despite differing in function—share a fundamental idea: they created adaptable spaces where daily life, performance, and coexistence were in constant interaction. These weren't rigid forms but flexible, evolving environments where the boundary between public and private was fluid, and where architecture was shaped by social rituals, proximity, and transformation over time.

Such qualities are largely absent in today's urban spaces, especially in institutional or post-industrial contexts, where fragmentation and rigid programs tend to dominate. This research argues for a different approach to design—one that is flexible, relational, and grounded in the performative potential of space, in contrast to fragmentation. The project incorporates concepts of adaptability, communal engagement, temporality, multifunctionality, and publicness (Fig. 2), all of which are critical in reimagining La Galera as a space that fosters ongoing interaction and transformation.

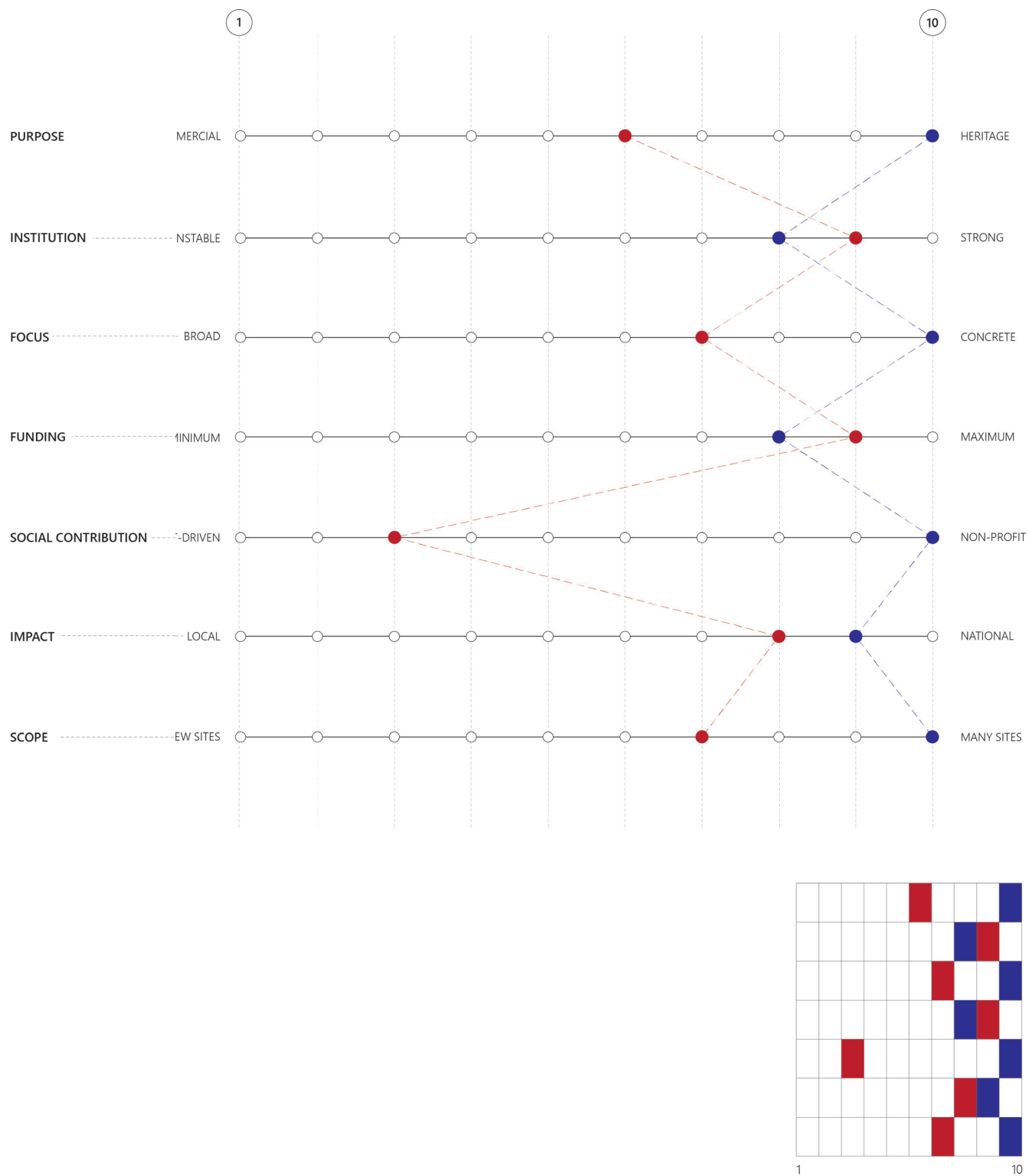


Fig.3 Comparison between the Lista Roja endangered sites and the Paradores network, highlighting their contrasting approaches to heritage reuse.

3. Position and Relevance

La Galera in Alcalá de Henares offers a unique setting to explore this approach. A former 19th-century women's prison, the building is currently unused and suspended between institutional boundaries and urban inertia. However, the site is far from neutral. La Galera is surrounded by key urban elements: the University Theatre, which inspired this project due to its proximity and its connection to the Corrales de Comedias; the University Archive (UAH), which anchors the area in knowledge, memory, and academic production; and the Archivo General de la Administración, which extends this archival focus to a national scale. Across the street, the Parador, a luxury hotel in a former convent, offers a contrasting example of heritage reuse—exclusive, curated, and self-contained. This sharp contrast between La Galera's neglect—listed on the Lista Roja of endangered heritage—and the Parador's polished reinvention illustrates two diverging attitudes toward heritage: invisibility versus spectacle, abandonment versus curated exclusivity (Fig.3). The project intervenes in this space of contradiction, proposing a third way rooted in activation, care, and public relevance.

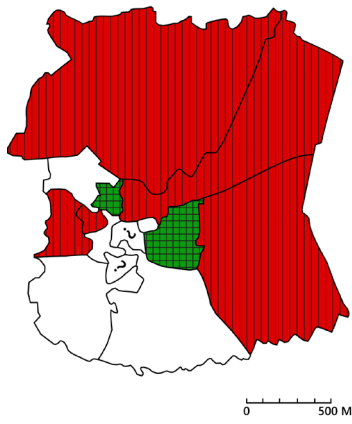
These surrounding structures create a space of tension, where different values of use, access, and identity coexist. The project embraces this tension, proposing not a fixed program or “solution” for La Galera, but rather its transformation into a hybrid and performative research hub and piazza comune. This space would include residential units for visiting scholars, rooms for document consultation and collective study, and areas for informal gatherings and interdisciplinary exchange. These uses don't just overlay the site—they emerge from its role as a connective void, positioned between institutions, disciplines, and time periods.

Beyond the building, the project extends into the surrounding urban fabric with light, adaptive interventions: a civic platform for informal public events, shaded outdoor study areas, and a series of architectural pathways that link the archives, the theatre, and the city. This way, the project reimagines La Galera not as a destination but as a relational tool—a spatial pivot that activates and amplifies existing uses rather than isolating itself from them.

Choosing Alcalá de Henares as the context is deliberate. The city, historically a university town—an “ideal city of learning” rooted in Renaissance humanism—embodies the intellectual and communal values this project seeks to revive. Through the lens of the Corralas and Corrales de Comedias, the project proposes a new model of urban heritage: inclusive rather than exclusive, performative rather than monumental, and responsive rather than fixed.

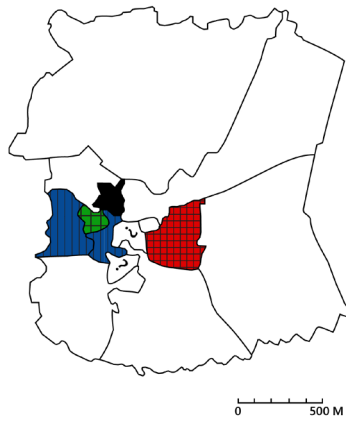
By grounding the project in the historical and social logic of collective life, and by using light, precise interventions, it aims to transform La Galera from a site of confinement into a catalyst for coexistence, research, and urban vitality, creating a space where adaptability, communal exchange, and publicness are at the core, and where the building and the urban context can continually evolve together.

Building density in 1597



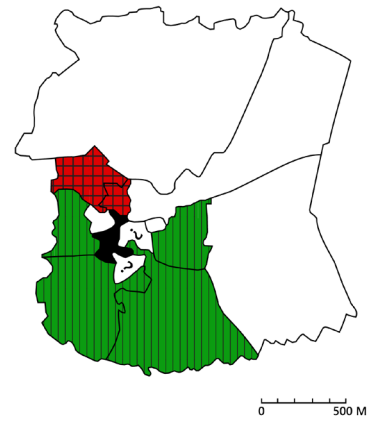
Houses/ hectare	6.35	15.78	68.23
	9.30	16.31	69.96
	10.92	16.36	
	12.55	17.55	?
		23.54	5 & 6

Families density in 1597



Families/ hectare	16.62	43.60
	20.57	53.30
	20.80	
	21.23	75.85
	25.96	
	26.62	163.08
		221.41

Household occupancy in 1597



Families per house	1	3
	2	4

Fig.4 Building density in Madrid after its 1561 designation as capital.

4. Adaptability and Community in Urban Spaces

The Corralas of Madrid, a distinctive vernacular housing model, emerged from the city's historical evolution, shaped by social, economic, and architectural influences over centuries.

In 1561, King Philip II made the pivotal decision to transfer the royal court to Madrid, designating it as Spain's capital. This choice, driven by the city's central location, facilitated governance over the vast Spanish territories. At the time, Madrid was a relatively small town with an estimated population of 25,000 to 30,000¹. The arrival of the court triggered rapid, often unregulated demographic and urban growth, profoundly transforming the cityscape. This rapid expansion created an urgent need for housing, particularly for lower-income populations, leading to the proliferation of shared dwellings and early forms of the *casa de corredor*².

By the late 16th century, Madrid experienced significant expansion. The consequences of this growth became increasingly evident with Philip II's death and the economic crisis of the 17th century. A stark contrast emerged between the northern and southern areas of the city. While the north had fewer buildings but more single-family homes, the south saw a proliferation of multi-family dwellings³ (Fig. 4). This disparity marked early signs of vertical expansion as the need for multi-story housing grew to accommodate the increasing population. The presence of multiple families within single structures hinted at the early formation of the Corralas, a process linked to the increasing subdivision of existing buildings to accommodate Madrid's growing working class⁴.

To regulate this expansion, King Philip IV ordered the construction of a new city wall in 1625, defining Madrid's limits for nearly two centuries⁵. This physical boundary reinforced the trend of vertical growth, compelling architects to maximize available space. These developments—the demographic contrast between north and south and the city's physical containment—laid the groundwork for the Corralas, which would later become a defining feature of Madrid's vernacular architecture.

1. Sánchez, J. (2003). *Historia de Madrid*. Editorial Madrid.

2. Santa Cruz Astorqui, J. *Estudio Tipológico, Constructivo y Estructural de las Casas de Corredor en Madrid*, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid.

3. López, P., & Martín, R. (2010). *Madrid en el Siglo XVII*. Ediciones Urbanas.

4. Feinberg, M.I. (2021). *Lavapiés, Madrid as Twenty-First Century Urban Spectacle*. UKnowledge, University of Kentucky.

5. González, F. (2015). *El Madrid de los Austrias*. Alianza Editorial.



Fig.5 Typological classifications of corralas in Madrid, categorized as A: Closed, B: Semi-open, and C: Miscellaneous.

4. Adaptability and Community in Urban Spaces

Corralas became the dominant housing model among Madrid's working class. These buildings featured a central communal courtyard that could adapt in shape (Fig. 5), with individual apartments arranged around it. Access was provided by wooden galleries overlooking the courtyard, giving rise to their name¹. Their origins can be traced back to the casa-patio, a tradition inherited from Mediterranean and Islamic influences. This architectural concept, with roots in Mesopotamian dwellings, influenced Greek and Roman houses and culminated in the Roman domus². The relationship between private and public spaces in Roman cities, where shared courtyards and galleries played a crucial role, finds echoes in Madrid's Corralas, which adapted these principles to an urban working-class context³.

Madrid's central location exposed it to both classical and Muslim architectural traditions, resulting in a hybrid urban identity. The Corralas embodied this synthesis, incorporating Roman and Islamic elements while adapting to Madrid's socio-economic realities. These residences primarily housed low-income families, often accommodating large numbers of tenants in small units. The communal courtyard, initially a functional and social space, later became associated with overcrowding and poor sanitation. Even in the 20th century, around 25% of Corralas still relied on a single shared water well⁴.

Despite often precarious conditions, Corralas played a crucial role in shaping Madrid's social fabric. They fostered strong communal ties, providing shared spaces for social interaction and mutual support. As urban planning evolved and new housing developments emerged, many Corralas were demolished or renovated. However, some have been preserved and restored, recognized today as significant cultural and architectural heritage⁵.

The transformation of Madrid into Spain's capital in 1561 set the stage for profound urban and demographic changes, ultimately leading to the development of the Corralas. These structures reflect the city's adaptation to the challenges of rapid population growth, spatial limitations, and diverse cultural influences, enduring as a testament to Madrid's rich architectural and social history.

1. Santa Cruz Astorqui, J. Estudio Tipológico, Constructivo y Estructural de las Casas de Corredor en Madrid, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid.

2. Ruggiu, A.Z. (1995). Spazio Privato e Spazio Pubblico nella Città Romana. L'Erma di Bretschneider.

3. Micara, L. (1985). Architetture e Spazi dell'Islam: Le Istituzioni Collettive e la Vita Urbana. Bulzoni.

4. Feinberg, M.I. (2021). Lavapiés, Madrid as Twenty-First Century Urban Spectacle. UKnowledge, University of Kentucky.

5. Díaz, C. (2013). Madrid y su Patrimonio. Ediciones Municipales.

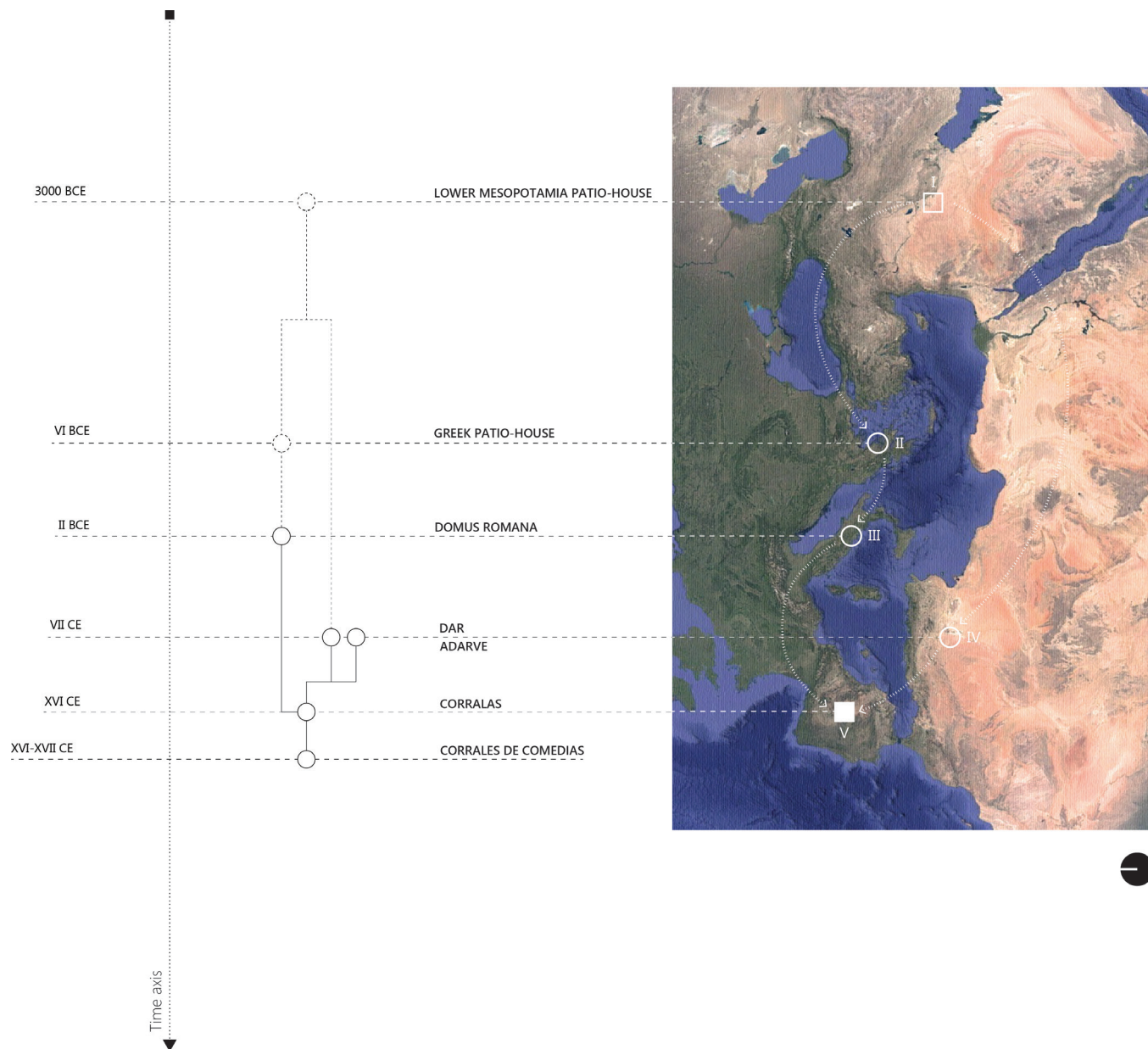


Fig.6 Timeline on a map showing the evolution of housing typologies that influenced the development of the casas de vecindad

4. Adaptability and Community in Urban Spaces

The Casa de Corredor model emerged from the blending of various architectural traditions that shaped the Iberian Peninsula over centuries. Its origins can be traced to the casa-patio, a housing typology widespread in ancient Mediterranean civilizations, from Mesopotamian dwellings to Greek villas and Roman domus¹ (Fig.6). The first patio houses, dating back to Sumerian civilization, centered around an inner courtyard, a concept later refined by Greek and Roman innovations such as the peristyle, which balanced private and public space while improving ventilation and thermal regulation. In Roman domus, the central patio linked different rooms without internal corridors and helped regulate temperature. In rural areas, patios also served as storage areas and shelters for animals, a feature that later reappeared in Castilian rural homes. Following the decline of the Roman Empire, the Visigothic period preserved these architectural elements until urban development resumed in the Middle Ages².

Islamic architecture enhanced the casa-patio model, making it more introverted. Muslim houses featured plain facades but richly ornamented interiors with gardens, ensuring privacy and thermal comfort. This layout suited Islamic cities, where narrow, winding streets regulated temperature and enhanced security³. A significant Muslim urban innovation was the Aadarve, a dead-end alley with restricted access, fostering cooperative communities. This concept influenced the future Casas de Corredor, where internal spaces were shared among residents. As urban density increased, courtyards shrank, and houses were divided into multiple units, a phenomenon that reemerged centuries later in Madrid's Casas de Corredor, which accommodated the working class in converted traditional residences.

The origins of this study trace back to the Corrales de Comedias, an architectural and cultural phenomenon that emerged in the late 16th century as Spain sought to regulate public performances⁴. Prior to their establishment, theatrical productions took place in open plazas, often lacking structure and control. In response, the monarchy, particularly under Philip II and Philip III, promoted the adaptation of existing residential courtyards—often within Corralas—into designated theater spaces. These proto-theaters evolved into the Corrales de Comedias, characterized by rectangular courtyards enclosed by wooden galleries, where audiences could gather to watch performances from multiple levels.

These venues played a pivotal role in Spain's Golden Age of literature, hosting works by renowned playwrights such as Lope de Vega, Tirso de Molina, and Calderón de la Barca. Over time, as theater gained greater institutional recognition, purpose-built playhouses gradually replaced the Corrales de Comedias, leading to their decline in the 18th century. However, their architectural legacy persisted. The spatial configuration of the Corrales—open courtyards, wooden galleries, and a communal emphasis—paralleled the design of Madrid's Corralas⁵.

1. Santa Cruz Astorqui, J. Estudio Tipológico, Constructivo y Estructural de las Casas de Corredor en Madrid, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid.

2. Ruggiu, A.Z. (1995). Spazio Privato e Spazio Pubblico nella Città Romana. L'Erma di Bretschneider.

3. Micara, L. (1985). Architetture e Spazi dell'Islam: Le Istituzioni Collettive e la Vita Urbana. Bulzoni.

4. Feinberg, M.I. (2021). Lavapiés, Madrid as Twenty-First Century Urban Spectacle. UKnowledge, University of Kentucky.

5. Historia Urbana Madrid. "Corrales de Comedias y las Corralas de Madrid." Historia Urbana Madrid.

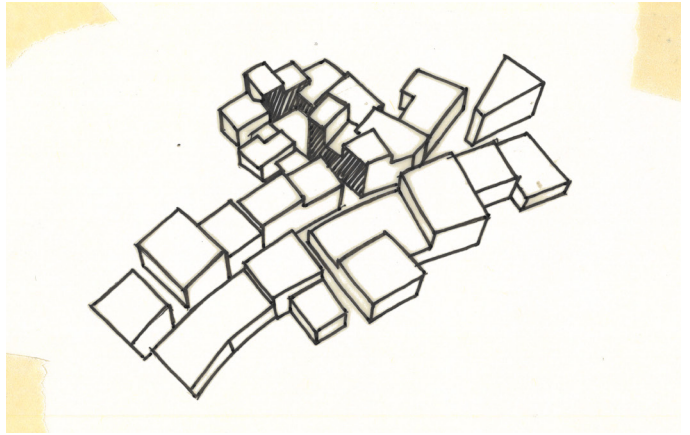


Fig.8 Adarve

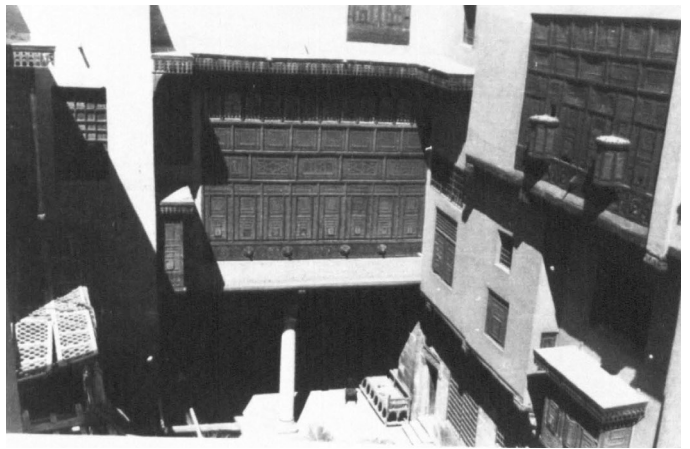


Fig.9 Dar

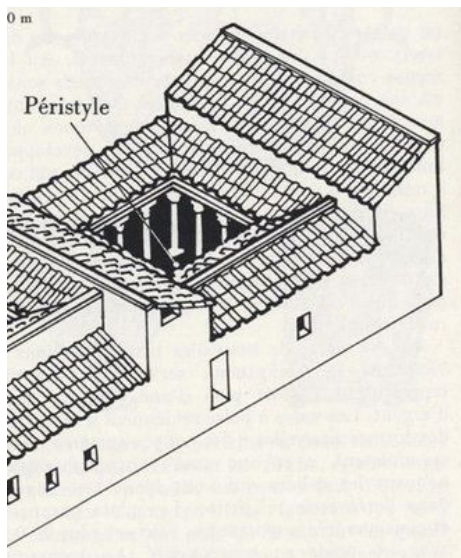


Fig.7 Domus Romana

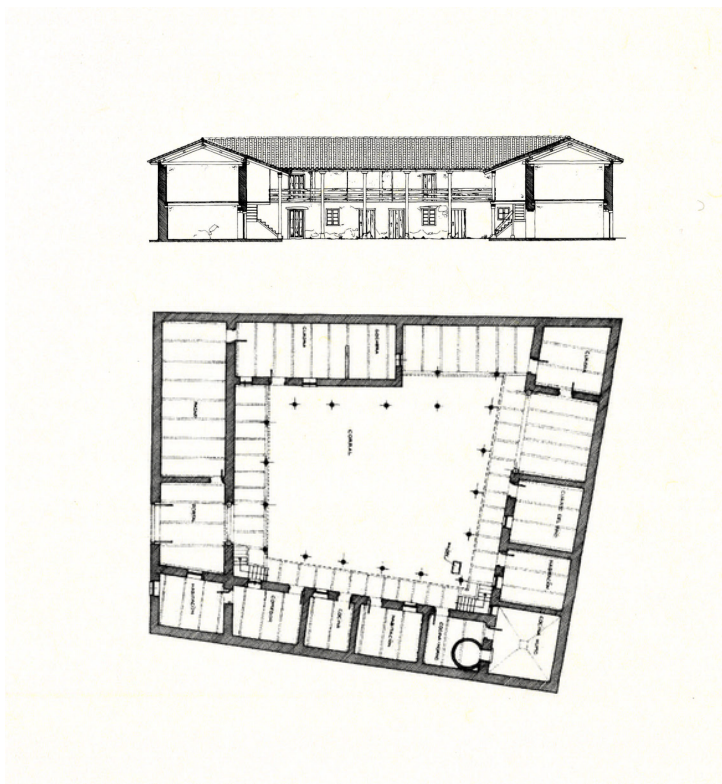
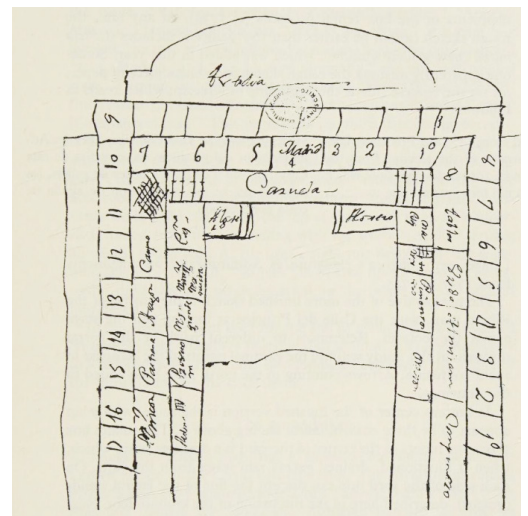


Fig.10 Corrala



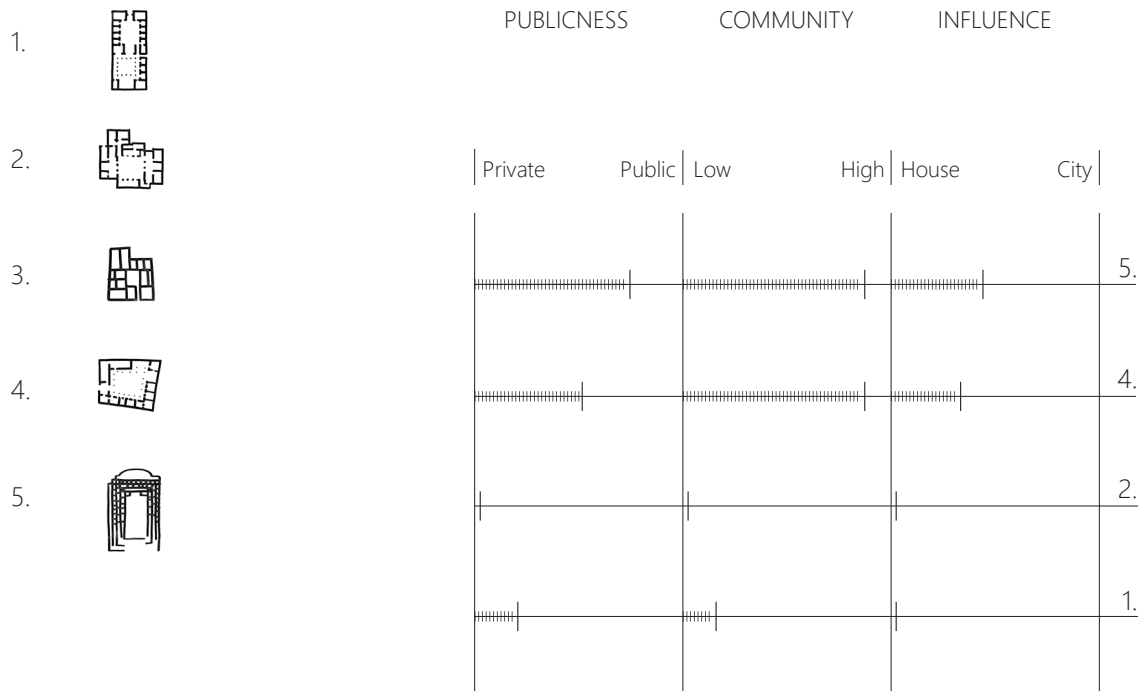
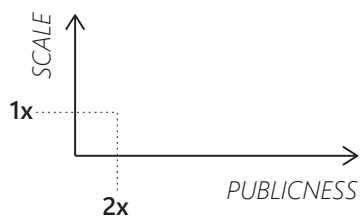
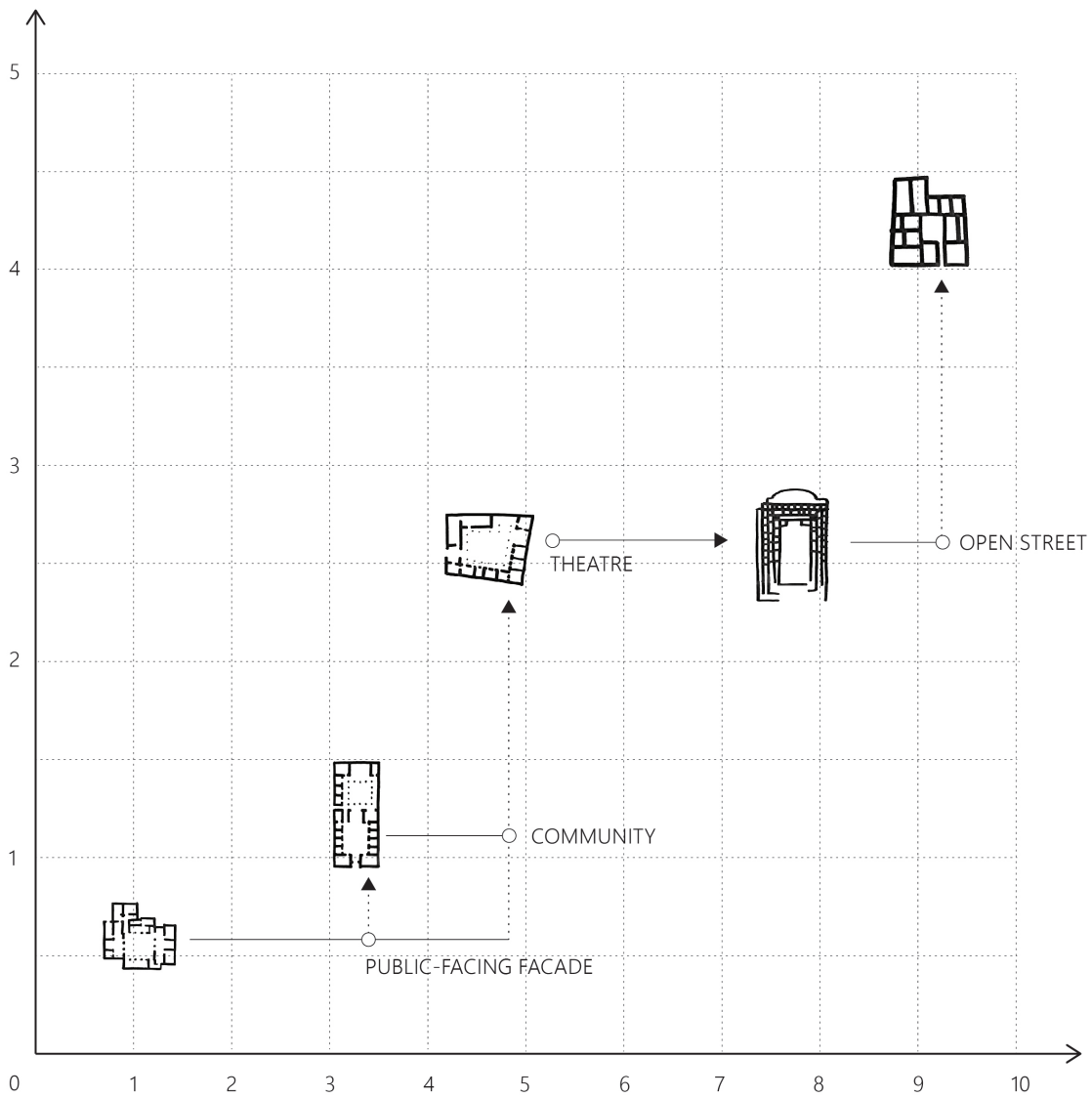
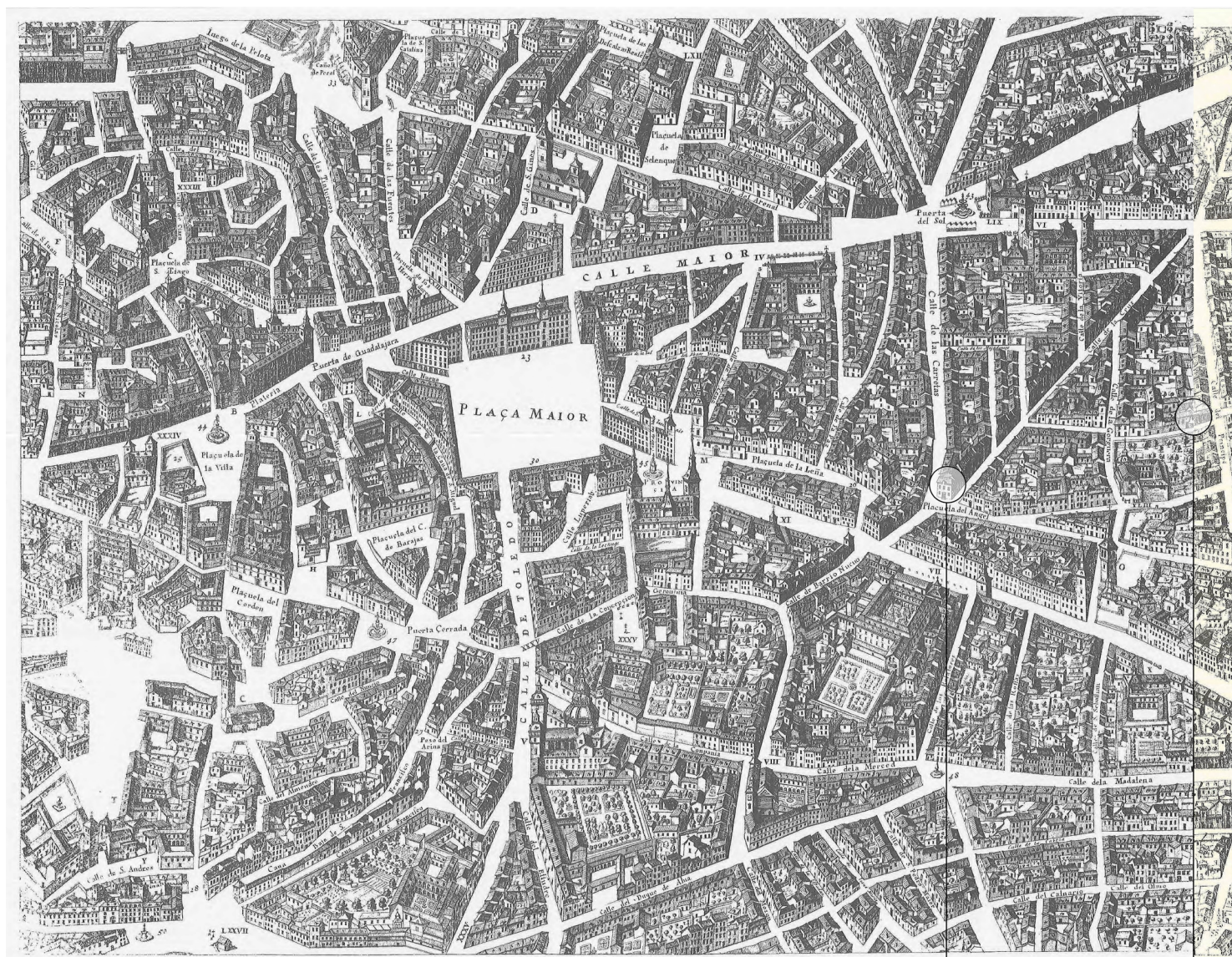


Fig.12 Schematic interpretation of the typologies analyzed placed according to their scale and publicness

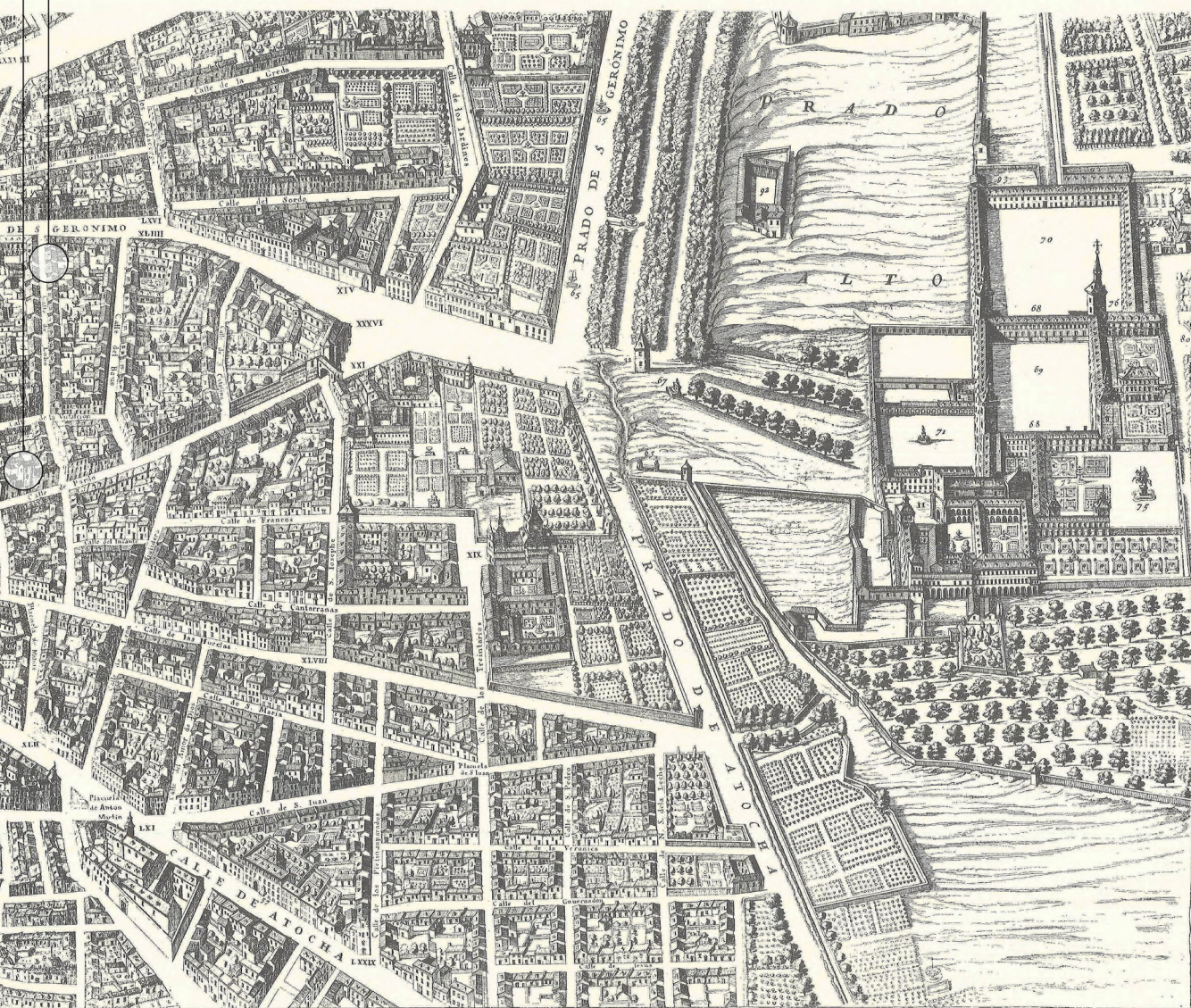




Corral de la Cruz

Corral de la Pacheca

Fig.13 Map of 1656 with the original locations of the corrales de comedias

| *Corral del Puente*

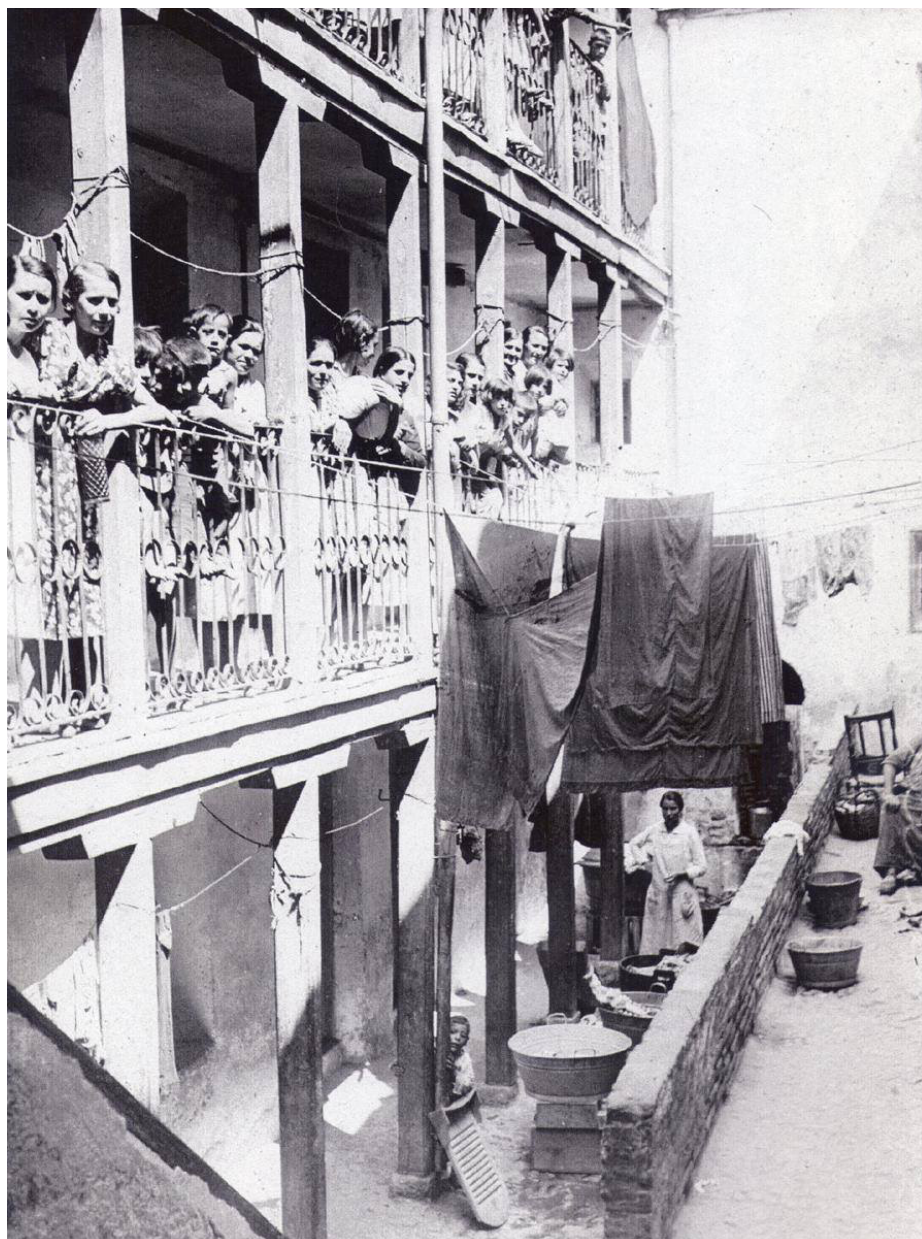


Fig 14. Corrala en Vallecas en 1933

5. Theoretical Framework

Communal Urban Architecture and the Performance of Space

The study of communal urban architecture draws upon theories emphasizing adaptability, social interaction, and the performative potential of space. These principles align with the historical roles of the Corralas and Corrales de Comedias, where architectural design functioned both as a stage for daily life and as a medium for community engagement. This section explores key theoretical insights that inform contemporary urban design, with particular attention to the adaptability and multifunctionality of spaces.

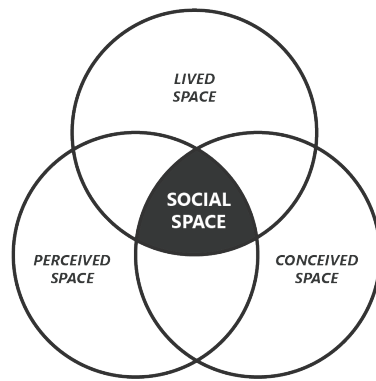


Fig. 15 Scheme illustrating Henri Lefebvre's idea of social space as the space produced by and for the society

5. Theoretical Framework

5.1 Henri Lefebvre: Social Space and Everyday Life

Henri Lefebvre's seminal work *The Production of Space* introduces the concept of "social space," asserting that space is not a passive container for human activity but is actively produced and transformed through human relations and practices (Fig. 15). Lefebvre distinguishes between three types of space: lived space, perceived space (linked to daily life), and conceived space (abstract and institutionalized notions of space). According to Lefebvre, space is "lived" rather than simply "built," underscoring its dynamic and evolving nature. This perspective challenges traditional views of space as static, proposing instead that it is shaped by power structures, cultural practices, and individual needs.¹

In the context of the Corralas, Lefebvre's theory illuminates how spaces originally designed for private residence evolved through social interactions, transforming courtyards into multifunctional public arenas. This adaptability reflects the temporal and fluid nature of urban spaces, which respond to the everyday actions of their users. Lefebvre's ideas suggest designing spaces that accommodate functional use while evolving in tandem with social activities, interactions, and movements. This approach highlights the temporal adaptability of spaces, enabling them to balance private and collective experiences, much like the Corrales de Comedias that transitioned between performative and everyday uses.

1. Lefebvre, H., *The Production of Space*, Blackwell, 1991.



Fig.16 Corrala de Sombrerete, 1935. An example of space as a site for congregation, echoing Sennett's ideas on shared urban life.

5. Theoretical Framework

5. 2 Richard Sennett: Openness and Interaction

Richard Sennett's *The Open City* advocates for urban environments that encourage spontaneity and social interaction. Sennett critiques rigidly planned environments that inhibit these encounters and proposes an alternative urbanism centered on flexibility, fluidity, and permeability.¹ For Sennett, openness refers not only to physical space but also to social inclusivity, where architecture fosters diverse interactions and relationships.

The Corralas and Corrales de Comedias embody this principle by creating spaces where social groups could congregate and engage in shared cultural activities. The transformation of courtyards into informal theaters illustrates the flexible use of space for both private and communal functions. Sennett's ideas highlight the importance of designing spaces that invite diverse social interactions and foster community engagement, ensuring that the architecture supports spontaneity and collective activity.

1. Sennett, R., *The Open City*, Yale University Press, 1990.

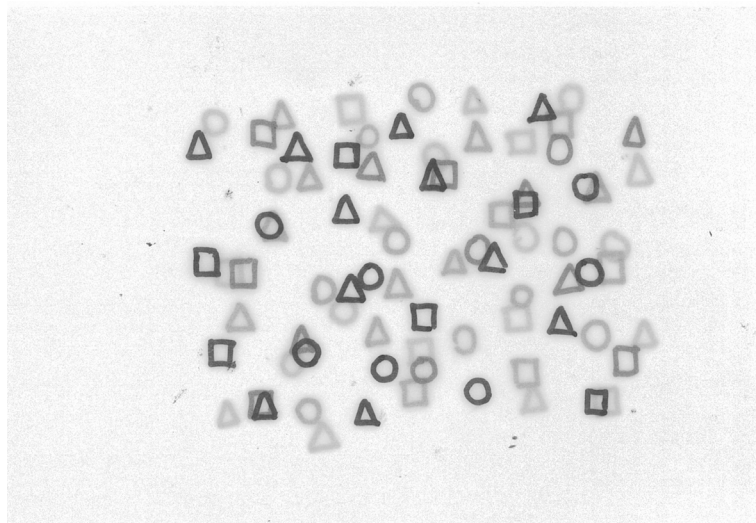
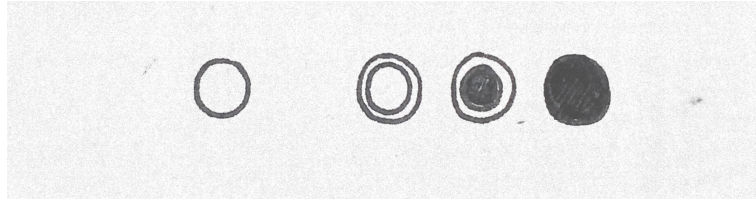


Fig.17 Schematic depiction of Moneo's idea of typology as adaptive yet consistent in its essence

Fig.18 Schematic drawing illustrating Rossi's concept of architecture as collective memory, linking a city through time.

5. Theoretical Framework

5.3 Rafael Moneo and Aldo Rossi: Memory and Typology

Rafael Moneo's exploration of typology underscores the enduring relevance of architectural forms that adapt to new uses while retaining their essential identity (Fig. 17). In *On Typology*, Moneo emphasizes that buildings and urban forms carry a memory of past practices, guiding their transformation to meet contemporary needs.¹

Similarly, Aldo Rossi, in *The Architecture of the City*, introduces the concept of the "urban artifact," describing architecture as a repository of collective memory that links a city's past to its present and future (Fig. 18). Rossi's urban artifact embodies historical significance, serving as a marker of continuity amidst change.²

The Corralas and Corrales de Comedias reflect these ideas by demonstrating how spaces can evolve while preserving their historical identity. Their typological design allowed for repurposing over time without losing their connection to historical function. These theories emphasize the importance of retaining the site's historical essence while transforming it into a dynamic, functional space. The memory embedded in the architectural forms of the Corralas serves as a model for interventions that respect the past while addressing present and future needs.

1. Moneo, R., *On Typology*, in *Theoretical and Practical Approaches to Architectural Design*, Harvard University Press, 1992.

2. Rossi, A., *The Architecture of the City*, MIT Press, 1982.

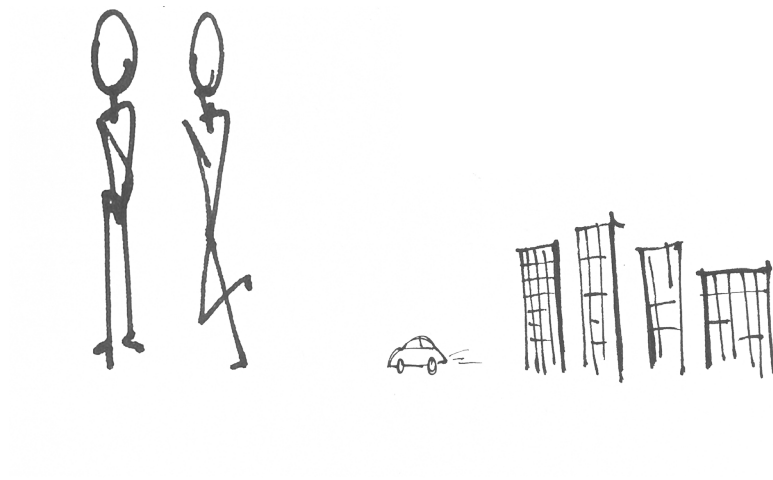


Fig.19 Schematic representation of Ghel's idea of an urban environment that prioritizes the human scale.

5. Theoretical Framework

5.4 Jan Gehl: The Choreography of Movement

Jan Gehl, in *Cities for People*, emphasizes the choreography of human movement in urban design. Gehl advocates for creating spaces that prioritize human-scale activities (Fig.19)—walking, gathering, and interacting—to ensure that people feel safe, comfortable, and engaged with their surroundings. He emphasizes the importance of designing spaces that encourage participation and interaction, rather than being dominated by vehicles or large-scale infrastructures.¹

The courtyards of the Corralas exemplify Gehl's principles by facilitating both private life and public performance. Their design supported fluid transitions between residential and communal functions, illustrating the importance of environments that accommodate diverse human activities. Gehl's insights underline the value of human-centered design, creating spaces that invite engagement, foster interaction, and balance intimacy with openness.

1. Gehl, J., *Cities for People*, Island Press, 2013.



Fig.20 Corralas as Corrales de Comedias. Inspired by Jacobs' idea of integrating multiple functions within architectural space.

5. Theoretical Framework

5.5 Jane Jacobs: Diversity and Vibrancy

In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs champions urban diversity, advocating for mixed-use neighborhoods that foster vibrant and dynamic communities. Jacobs critiques the homogeneity of modernist planning, emphasizing the importance of variety in functions (Fig. 20), users, and social groups within urban spaces. She highlights the concept of “eyes on the street,” underscoring how active observation and engagement enhance safety, vibrancy, and a sense of life.¹

The Corralas embody Jacobs’ principles by integrating residential, social, and public functions, creating spaces where diverse activities coexist. Their flexible use for private and public purposes resonates with Jacobs’ vision of urban environments that thrive on variety. Jacobs’ ideas suggest integrating multifunctional spaces—such as cultural hubs, educational facilities, and community centers—to foster inclusivity and dynamic interactions among various social groups.

1. Jacobs, J., *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Random House, 1961.

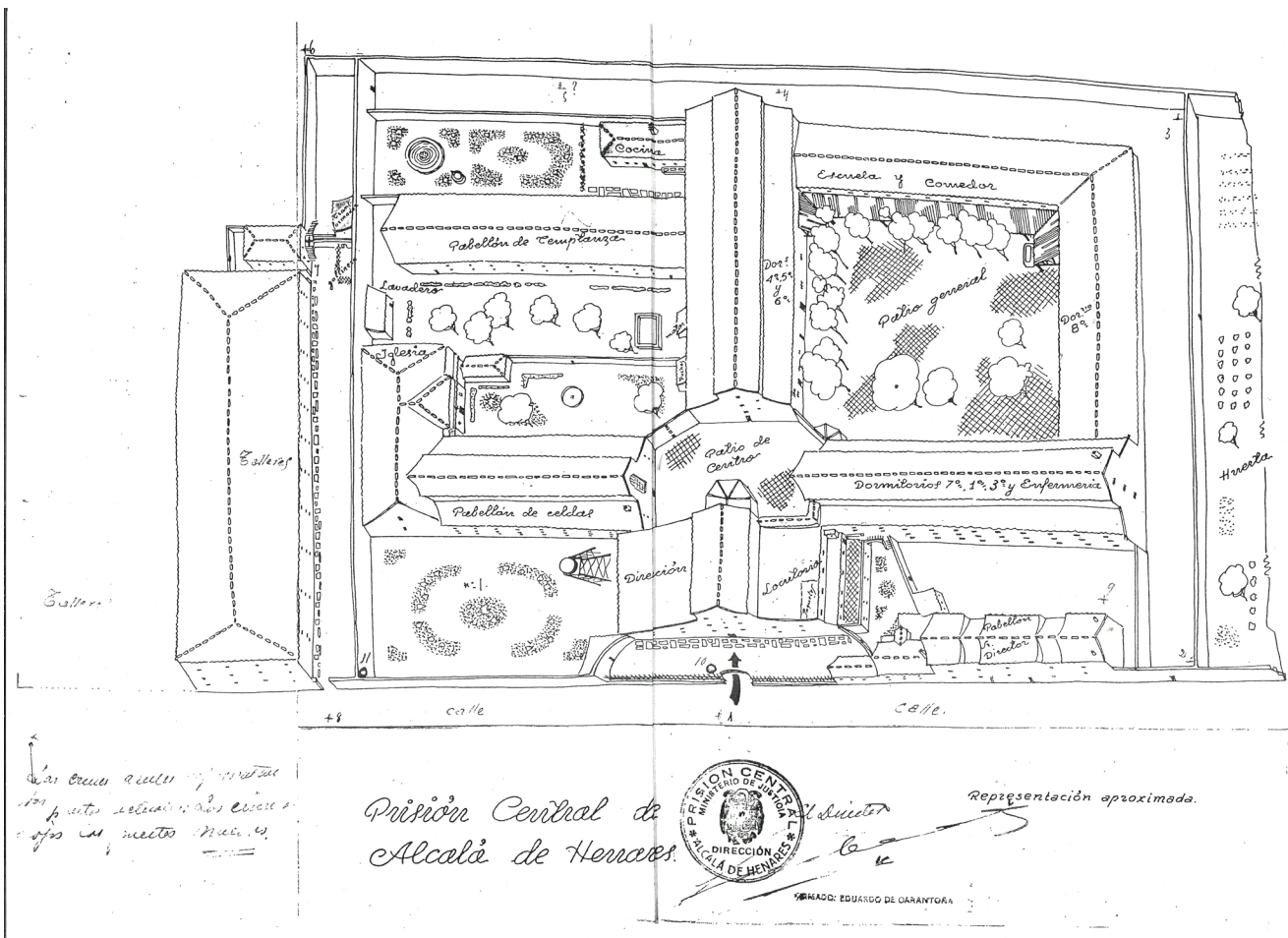


Fig.21 Archival document of the chosen site, La Galera. Reflects Lynch's notion of clear urban demarcations as a means to integrate spaces into the city fabric.

5. Theoretical Framework

5.6 Kevin Lynch: Legibility and Connectivity

Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City* highlights the importance of legibility in urban design, arguing that cities should be easily understood and navigable. Lynch identifies key elements—paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks—as essential for creating coherent and connected urban environments. He emphasizes that legible cities foster a sense of belonging and help individuals navigate both physically and emotionally.⁷

Lynch's principles underscore the need for clear connections between the site and its urban context. Designing pathways, landmarks, and visible links to surrounding areas can enhance the site's integration into the broader city, bridging historical and contemporary spaces (Fig. 21). This approach ensures that the site becomes a cohesive part of the urban fabric, supporting both orientation and connectivity.

1. Lynch, K., *The Image of the City*, MIT Press, 1960.

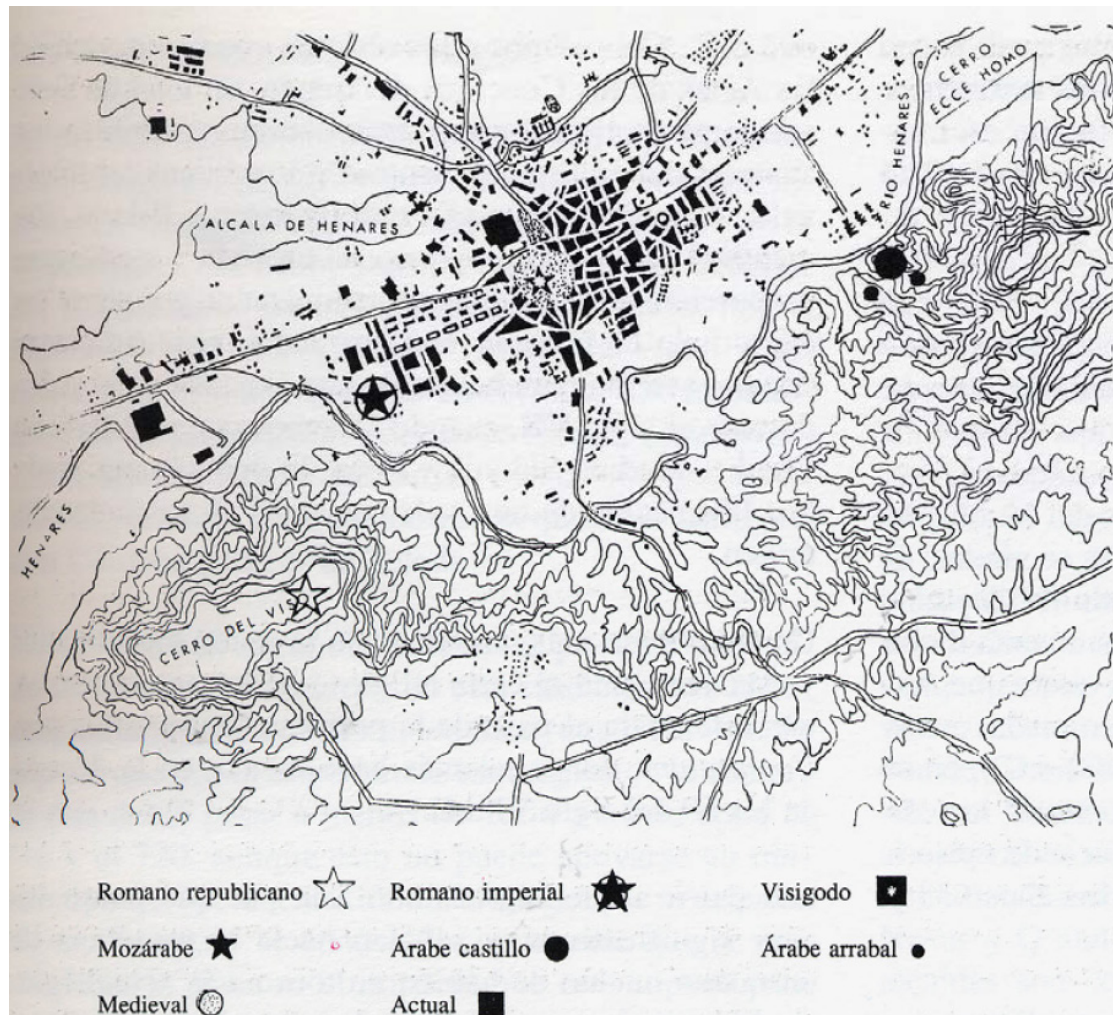


Fig.22 Map showing the various settlements that existed before Alcalá de Henares developed into a city

6. Urban Palimpsest

Alcalá de Henares stands out as one of Spain's most significant cities due to its extraordinary historical heritage and strong connection with academic culture. Located along the Henares River, the city boasts a layered past that traces back to the ancient Roman Complutum, evolving through Visigothic and Muslim rule before being established as a center of learning with the founding of the Universitas Complutensis in 1499¹. This transformation profoundly influenced its urban morphology, defining its role as a university city and solidifying its reputation as a hub of innovation and cultural exchange.

The origins of Alcalá de Henares date back to the pre-Roman era, with archaeological evidence indicating that the region was inhabited by Carpetani tribes before becoming an important Roman settlement known as Complutum in the 1st century BCE. The city's strategic location along major trade routes facilitated economic growth and cultural development, with the construction of Roman baths, temples, and forums that contributed to its prosperity.

Following the fall of the Roman Empire, the Visigoths occupied the region, maintaining its importance as an administrative center. However, the city underwent a significant transformation with the arrival of Muslim rule in the early 8th century. During this period, Alcalá became a fortified settlement known as "Al-Qalat en-Nahr" (the castle on the river), from which its modern name derives (Fig.22). The construction of an alcázar (fortress) and the expansion of agricultural irrigation systems contributed to the city's economic sustainability.

During the Renaissance, under the guidance of Cardinal Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros, Alcalá was designed in 1499 as a model of an ideal city, a "Civitas Dei" that embodied the humanistic and religious principles of the time². Cisneros's vision was based on the integration of knowledge, religion, and urban planning, with the construction of colleges and spaces that fostered communal life among students and faculty. This vision drew inspiration from Renaissance ideal cities and aimed to create an environment where study and daily life were deeply interconnected, emphasizing discipline and moral rigor as integral aspects of academic formation. Alcalá de Henares thus became the first planned university city in Europe, where urban design was functional to pedagogy and the collective life of the academic community.

The city's urban fabric developed around the needs of the university, with colleges and residences for students and faculty, creating a strongly communal environment. The university's influence extended beyond architecture, shaping the city's social and economic life and promoting interaction among various classes and cultural groups³. However, in the 19th century, following liberal reforms and the increasing centralization of higher education, the Complutense University was transferred to Madrid, temporarily reducing the city's academic prominence. Only in the 20th century, with the reestablishment of the University of Alcalá, did the city regain its leading educational role, reaffirming its identity as a center of innovation and research.

1. UNESCO World Heritage Centre, University and Historic Precinct of Alcalá de Henares, accessed 2025.

2. Google Arts & Culture, University and Historic Precinct of Alcalá de Henares, accessed 2025.

3. VisitMadrid, Alcalá de Henares, accessed 2025.



Fig.23 Map of Alcalá de Henares planned as a university system, reflecting an urban layout shaped by academic institutions—an identity that later contributed to its designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

6. Urban Palimpsest

The University of Alcalá remains a prominent academic institution in Spain, recognized for its contributions to research and higher education. With over 28,000 students enrolled across multiple disciplines, the university plays a vital role in both national and international academic networks¹. It is a leader in fields such as biotechnology, environmental sciences, and digital humanities, collaborating with institutions worldwide to foster knowledge exchange and technological development. In 2021 alone, the university produced more than 1,500 scientific publications and secured numerous research grants from European and national funding bodies².

The university is also a key driver of the local economy, contributing significantly to employment and innovation in Alcalá. It generates thousands of direct and indirect jobs through faculty positions, administrative roles, and research projects, while also supporting local businesses that cater to students and staff³. Furthermore, Alcalá has embraced digitalization and sustainability initiatives, with the university investing in green campus projects, renewable energy integration, and smart city collaborations to improve urban life and ecological impact⁴.

In the following centuries, the city underwent numerous changes, particularly with the university's declining importance in the 18th and 19th centuries and the subsequent industrialization of the area in the 20th century⁵. The construction of railways and factories along the Henares River transformed Alcalá into a key industrial hub, contributing to urban expansion and demographic shifts. Despite these transformations, Alcalá has managed to preserve its identity as a cultural center, as evidenced by its inclusion in UNESCO's World Heritage List in 1998⁶ (Fig.23). UNESCO recognized the value of its historic center, characterized by university buildings, convents, and churches, highlighting the importance of its intellectual heritage.

Today, Alcalá remains a vibrant and dynamic city, populated by students and academics from around the world. The presence of the university, with its numerous faculties and research institutes, helps to sustain the spirit of innovation and cooperation that has characterized the city since its origins. This strong academic identity makes Alcalá an ideal context for urban regeneration projects focused on the university community, with particular attention to repurposing abandoned historic spaces such as La Galera⁷.

1. European Architectural Studies, Higher Education and Urban Integration in Alcalá, 2022.

2. Journal of Urban Studies, Scientific Contributions of the University of Alcalá, 2021.

3. Studies in Spanish History, The Economic Role of the University in Alcalá, 2020.

4. Wikipedia, Corredor del Henares, accessed 2025.

5. Hispania Nostra, Industrialization and Heritage Conservation, accessed 2025.

6. Cadena SER, Alcalá's UNESCO Designation, accessed 2025.

7. Hispania Nostra, Urban Regeneration and Heritage Sites, accessed 2025.

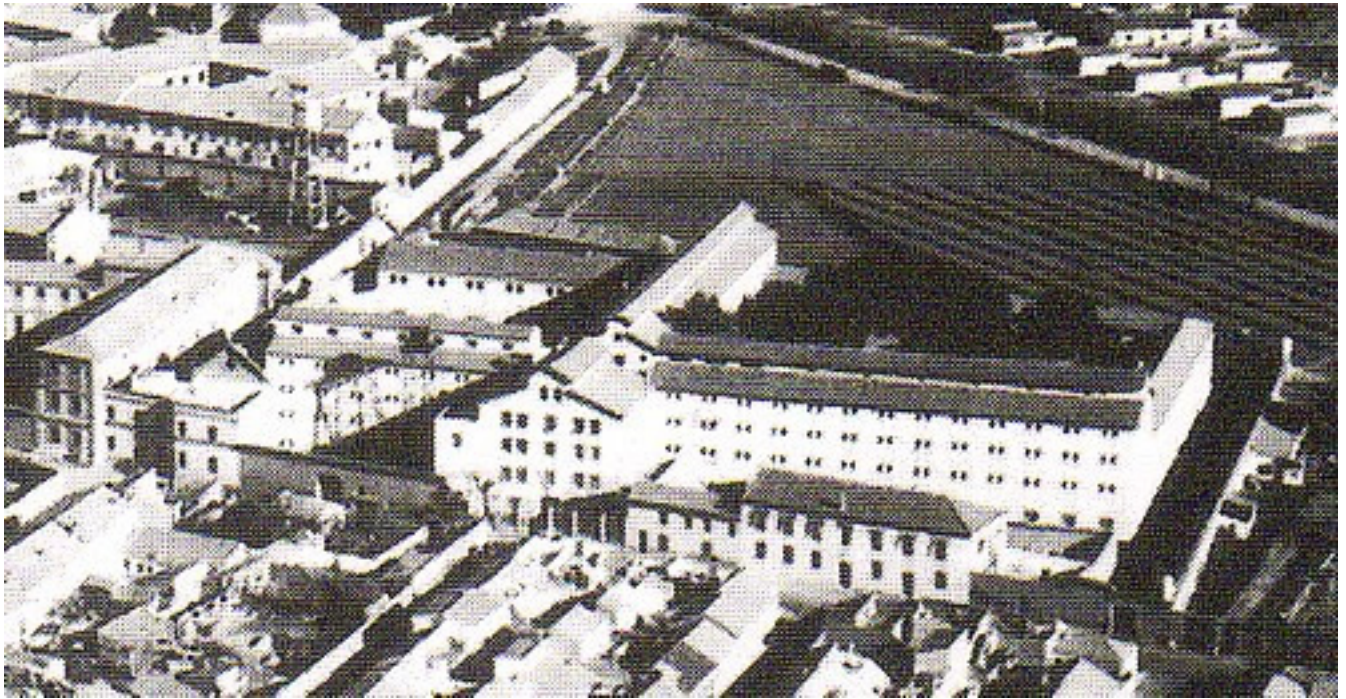


Fig.24 Aereal view of La Galera

7. La Galera as an Active Ruin

La Galera (Fig.24, 25), the historic women's prison of Alcalá de Henares, is currently in an advanced state of deterioration, with significant structural risk threatening its preservation. For this reason, it has been included in the Red List of Heritage by Hispania Nostra, an initiative that highlights endangered architectural assets in Spain and promotes their protection and restoration¹.

The building has a complex history rooted in Alcalá's urban transformation during the 19th century. Built in the second half of the 19th century on the site of a former Carmelite convent, La Galera was initially intended to house female inmates at a time when Spain sought to modernize its prison system in response to new security and disciplinary requirements imposed by penal reforms².

The adaptation project was entrusted to architect Tomás Aranguren, known for his work in constructing innovative detention facilities in Spain, inspired by panoptic models and contemporary penitentiary reforms. La Galera's structure followed these principles, combining traditional elements of convent architecture with new solutions designed to ensure surveillance and control of female prisoners³. During its operation, La Galera housed numerous women imprisoned for various offenses, many of whom were victims of a repressive system that viewed female incarceration as a means of social control.

After its closure in the 1970s, the building suffered decades of neglect, with repeated recovery attempts failing due to a lack of funding and a clear vision for its reuse⁴. However, recent academic and institutional initiatives are exploring new strategies for its redevelopment, with a restoration tender anticipated by 2026⁵.

1. García Sánchez. (n.d.). La Galera: History and preservation challenges.

2. Hispania Nostra. (n.d.). Female incarceration in 19th-century Spain.

3. Revista de Historia Urbana. (n.d.). Architectural analysis of La Galera.

4. Cadena SER. (n.d.). Failed restoration efforts of La Galera.

5. Hispania Nostra. (n.d.). Future plans for La Galera restoration

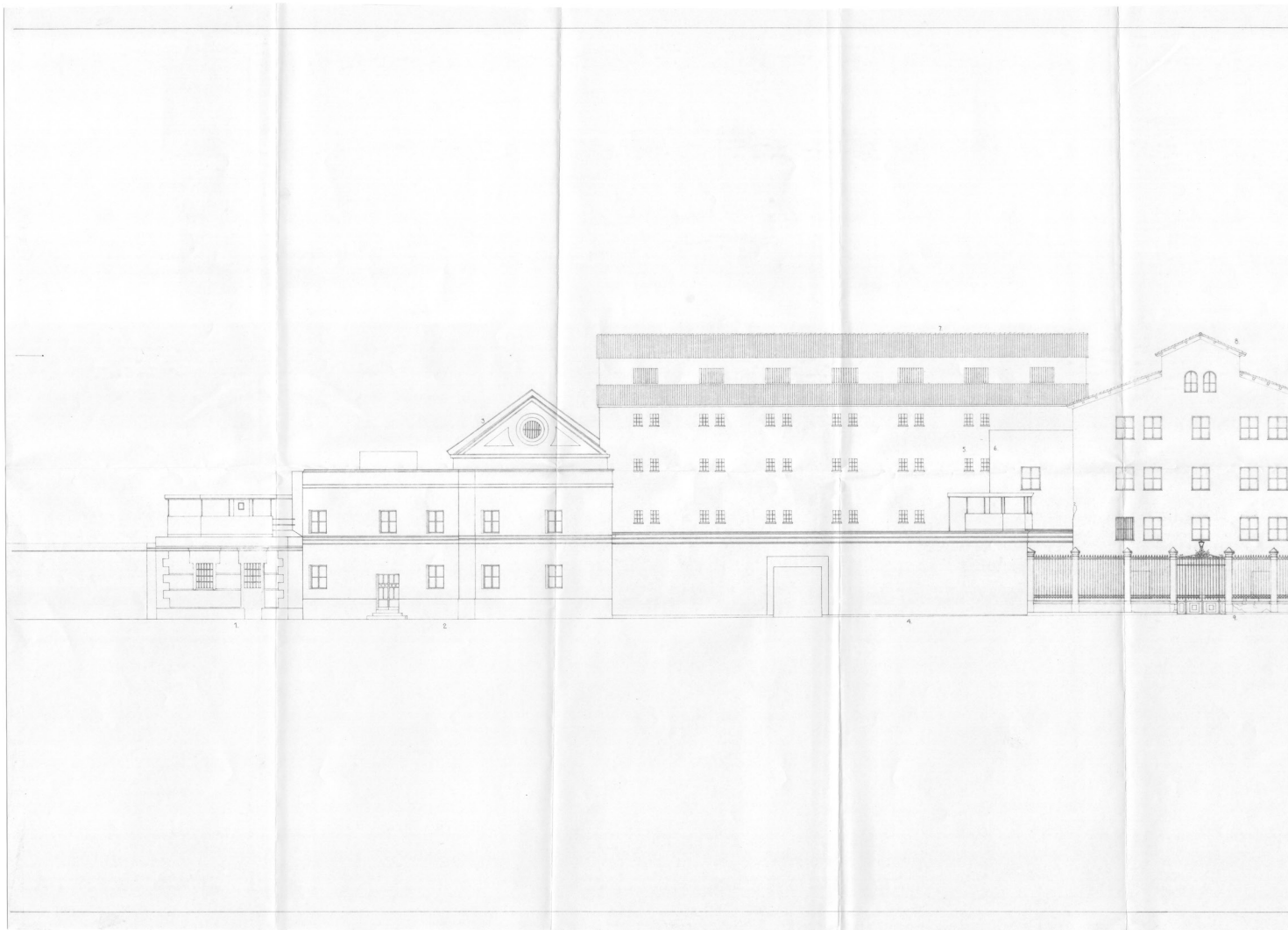


Fig.25 Archival front elevation drawing of La Galera

8. Discussion and Conclusion

The spatial configurations explored throughout this paper—whether in the historical typologies of the Corralas and Corrales de Comedias, in the theoretical frameworks of adaptable urban space, or in the specific context of Alcalá de Henares—reveal a consistent thread: that architecture can act as both a container and a catalyst for social life. These historical forms, far from being relics, offer a compelling vocabulary for reimagining contemporary communal living. Their adaptability, performative quality, and ability to mediate between private and collective needs make them valuable precedents in the context of urban regeneration.

The Corralas, with their inward-facing courtyards and layered circulation, and the Corrales de Comedias, as early spatial experiments in public performance and shared experience, challenge contemporary notions of spatial specialization and segmentation. Instead, they point toward an urban model rooted in flexibility, interaction, and shared temporality. As such, they embody the possibility of reclaiming architecture as an active agent in community formation.

Applying these insights to the case of La Galera offers an opportunity to test how memory-infused typologies and theoretical approaches might converge in the design of a renewed public space. The building's layered history—convent, prison, abandoned structure—makes it a powerful urban artifact, capable of accommodating new uses while preserving traces of its past. The goal is not to recreate a historical form, but to channel the spatial intelligence of these models into contemporary design strategies. This involves embracing ambiguity, layering functions, and allowing spaces to shift in meaning through everyday use. The theoretical reflections of Lefebvre, Sennett, Jacobs, and others reinforce this approach, emphasizing the value of lived experience, openness, diversity, and movement. Together, these principles invite a rethinking of spatial organization—not as fixed or singular, but as plural, participatory, and temporal. Within this framework, La Galera becomes more than a site for preservation; it becomes a testing ground for alternative urban futures, rooted in spatial justice, collective memory, and adaptive use.

Ultimately, the convergence of historical typologies, theoretical thought, and site-specific context allows us to formulate a design position that is at once respectful of the past and oriented toward new communal possibilities. By drawing on these spatial matters—not as abstract references but as operative tools—this paper proposes a design direction that reclaims architecture's capacity to host, support, and inspire collective life.

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