Cañada de Agra, componer con la topografía y el paisaje

Abstract: Cañada de Agra is a new village designed in 1962 by José Luis Fernández del Amo for the Spanish INC (National Institute for Colonization). This paper aims to elucidate the cultural context of this urban project, during the Franco Regime's post-war period of isolation, the hinterland colonization challenge and the state of architectural development at that time. The discipline of ‘ruralism’ can be traced throughout the 20th Century both for Spain and Europe, as a sort of planning policy primarily concerned with landscape, both natural and agricultural. Among the Spanish designers involved in this policy area, Fernández del Amo stands out for his extensive work in INC new settlements. In this examination of his career and in-depth analysis of Cañada de Agra, including schemes, diagrams and accompanying photo essay, the aim is to show the relevance of this project to the rural planning of the past century, in parallel with the work of other figures of the post-war Modern Movement. Moreover, as ‘ruralism’ is now making a comeback to the contemporary scene, a re-reading of these events may be of value in considering our approach.

Keywords: Architecture, Urbanism, Landscape, Art, Design.
INTRODUCTION

At the end of the nineteen fifties, the Instituto Nacional de Colonización (National Institute for Colonization, from now on INC) decided to undertake an irrigation project for a huge expanse of land in the Sierra de los Donceles, close to Hellin canal (Albacete province). Following the usual plans of the Institute it was decided to build three new population nuclei. Eventually they would be called “Nava de Campana,” “Cañada de Agra” and “Mingogil.”

In 2015, the Regional Government of Castilla-La Mancha declared Cañada de Agra Bien de Interés Cultural (Asset of Cultural Interest, BIC), as a historical site “set in the landscape, a uniform and well-defined entity.” Furthermore, the village is included in the Iberian modern housing register, DoCoMoMo, where it is also included in the National Plan for the 20th Century.

In this article we intend to analyze two questions regarding the urban project of Cañada de Agra: its importance in relation to the avant-garde within the historical context of the Franco regime, and the limitations confronting the colonization program. As regards architecture and urbanism in the Spanish post-war period we will try to establish their contextual dimension within the socio-political environment, as well as their sensitivity towards the landscape and territory. As regards agrarian policy and the creation of new towns or villages, we will try to identify the national program and its correspondences with other similar agrarian programs, as well as the progressive extinction of Spanish ruralism as a result of macroeconomic developments.

SPANISH TOWN PLANNING IN THE POST-WAR PERIOD: CONTRIBUTIONS FROM RURAL AREAS

We can distinguish four kinds of activity related to urbanism in the years following the end of the Spanish Civil War in 1939: the propaganda campaigns of the Regime; some small expansions or reforms in the urban areas; the rural actions of the Dirección General de Regiones Devastadas (Government office in charge of Post-war Rebuilding); and new towns or villages promoted by the INC. The Architectural Service within the INC allowed a new generation of architects to develop their professional practice within a more permissive context. Thanks to the peripheral character of their actions, the vagueness of internal rules and the character of José Tamés, the architect in charge of the office, a series of assorted projects were launched marked by “contradictory approaches, because although they were seeking to replicate traditional forms and environments, the serial arrangement of houses and the geometry of road planning departed substantially from the overall aim.”

The projects defined the whole physical environment of new towns in a way that led Alejandro de la Sota to plan a kind of surrealist joke in Esquivel. His plan included urban design, architecture and public furniture and even applied arts for the development of the ecclesiastical program. Following its vague romantic beginnings, this rural urbanism or ruralism was designed on a scale with architectural perspectives. Results were mixed due to the different ethical and ideological attitudes and skills of their authors. Here, the more “anonymous” proposals might be compared with the designs of architects with a stronger personality like Alejandro de la Sota, José Antonio Corrales, Antonio Fernández Alba, Fernando de Terán, Rafael Aburto or lastly, Fernández del Amo himself. One can find references to urban medievalism in Camilo Sitte, the utopias of the “Garden City” through its various evolutions, and the explicit model of Radburn, which is mentioned by the Instituto Nacional de la Vivienda (National Institute for Housing, INV). Subsequently, more complex approaches...
The Architecture Service in the National Institute for Colonization

The first government under General Francisco Franco was formed in Burgos on 31 January 1938, with the Falangist Raimundo Fernández-Cuesta in charge of the Ministry of Agriculture. One of his functions was the “economic and social reform of the land,” creating for its development the Servicio Nacional de Reforma Económica y Social de la Tierra (National Service for the Economic and Social Reform of the Land, SENREST). When the war came to an end, a second government was established in Burgos on 9 August 1939. One of the most important changes, was the appointment of Joaquín Benjumea Burín as the new minister of Agriculture; it meant that a Fascist revolutionary was replaced by a prestigious professional who belonged to the Andalusian agrarian oligarchy. Two months later SENREST was replaced by the INC in order to “create extensive plans of colonization which will be carried out according to the rules of the Movimiento program (official party of Franco’s Dictatorship). In October 1941 the Architecture Service of the INC was formed as a body for the implementation of new settlements in the colonized lands according to the new Colonization Act (Ley de Bases de Colonización de Grandes Zonas, published on 26 December 1939). Under the direction of José Tamés, the Architecture Service of the INC initiates discussions about plans for new villages with homes either scattered or aggregated in population nuclei. In considering technical requirements and previous models they were aware of the need to create two new artificial environments: agricultural, based on irrigation, and urban, consisting of new settlements. Colonization had been an object of study for centuries, but they now took as an example the Agro Pontino from Fascist Italy, in spite of its important technical and social differences. It is important to remember that in the Italian solution “towns function as service centers while the farmers’ dwellings are scattered over the land, precisely on the plot of land allocated.” Tamés himself was conscious of the differences, although his ideas were mainly based on the Spanish situation, “as has been resolved in the irrigated areas of Sardinia and in Bonifica del Tavolière.” On the other hand, even technical inputs were observed from ideological points of view, both from an awareness of the risk posed by urban liberal-bourgeois culture and the south Spanish peasantry, in particular agricultural labourers, most of whom were anarchists or revolutionary socialists. Apart from foreign influences, the most obvious example of the planning of new INC villages was the Concurso de anteproyectos para los poblados de las zonas regables del Guadalquivir y del Guadameellato (Competition for Settlements...
It was an exotic note, since transferring the Anglo-Saxon model to the rural areas of Spain, really supposed that the cohabitation between cars-people would be transferred to animals-people. Nevertheless, the model impressed the youngest architects deeply and acted as an ideological totem even for Tamés: hygiene vs. tradition; modernity vs pre-modernity. As regards its urban plan, Herrero published (1955) another article where he defended separated traffic and included Camilo Sitte’s instructions on the principles of urban composition concerning a need to break views, avoid monotony and pay attention to the details. By then, some of the INC villages (for instance those designed by Alejandro de la Sota or Fernández del Amo) had abandoned the romanticism of those rules and had been transformed into international examples of new modernity.

José Luis Fernández del Amo was born in 1914 to a bourgeois family from Madrid. In his youth he demonstrated his great curiosity and critical spirit thanks to the influence of the reformers of Acción Católica (Catholic Action). He started his university studies in the “Central” (University of Madrid) and in the School of Architecture, with colleagues like Miguel Fisac and Francisco de Asís Cabrero. When the Civil War began he sought refuge in the Swedish Embassy and from there he fled to the Belgian abbey of Maredsous, where he remained for two years. Returning to Spain in 1938, he fought in Franco’s army as a sapper until the end of the war. He finished his studies in 1942 and began to work as an architect in the Dirección General de Regiones Devastadas, firstly posted to Aragon and one year later to Granada, where the office for eastern Andalusia was located under the direction of José Tamés.
of Francisco Prieto Moreno. There, he started to engage culturally with young local artists, intellectuals and local politicians, like Antonio Gallego Burín, and also met Eugenio D’Ors, who at that time was leading a real renovation of Spanish art.  

Fernández del Amo finally became a civil servant in the INC on 28 March 1947. His most personal contribution as an architect was a series of projects for small towns, but prior to any exclusive attribution to him of these INC’s settlements, one has to consider many other agents or circumstances:

- Settlements were planned under a multi-disciplinary process set out by the INC, where politicians, agricultural engineers and even the landowners could take decisions prior to architects.
- Each project was formally reviewed twice, in the Architecture Service and in the corresponding Section, being approved or corrected by an order from the General Directorate.
- Works had a long duration, on some occasions under the technical direction of a project manager different from the author.
- Finally, the uses of their inhabitants and the historical evolution of these nuclei have transformed their physical appearance in such a way that sometimes it can be impossible to match current spaces with the ones originally designed.

Fernández del Amo himself explained his convictions on many occasions with regard to contemporary art and architecture. His “legacy” on the integration of the arts was made clear in 1968, during the summer courses of the Menéndez Pelayo International University.  

NEW INC VILLAGES PLANNED BY JOSÉ LUIS FERNÁNDEZ DEL AMO

An advocate of the transcendence of Spanish ruralism, Fernández del Amo showed a pioneering sensibility towards the environment. A fundamental element in his most relevant new villages for INC was his admiration for autonomous ecosystems: at the beginning of the fifties, in his proposal (unbuilt) for Torres de Salinas by the Alberche River, the
planning of roads was subordinated to the “attention to spontaneous vegetation, wild plants, shrubs, and hedge mustards flowering on the banks.” The preserved bank “would provide a dry garden, natural in the inhabited spaces” for the collective life of the farmers, “a vital atmosphere, and environment for man that the colonization must create.”

This idea of preserving the natural memories of the past is featured in another project proposed by Fernández del Amo three years later, for the new village of Vegaviana in Caceres. This time he was able to carry it out thanks, perhaps, to the value of the area’s forests. In fact, due to the separation between traffic and pedestrians, he achieved in Vegaviana a series of areas for the co-habitation of people and a landscape “completely covered with shrubs, wonderful trees, most of them evergreen oaks, some old cork trees, and a ground cover of rockrose, lavender, thyme, hedge mustard and broom” (Figure 1). Even the square, a simple arrangement of public buildings, avoids “a rigid and...
closed composition" to preserve the integration of the site with the landscape.40

Not all of Fernández del Amo’s villages for the INC were so explicit about maintaining local ecosystems. However, this relation with topography appears fundamental in most of his projects, from Belvis de Jarama (Madrid, 1949) to the expansion of Jumilla (Murcia, 1969). Especially in the flattest locations, the structures of roads, public spaces and special landmarks (especially the church tower) were planned with a respect for the previous landscape, whether natural or artificial. In spite of the anachronism and the huge differences of scale, one could say that the “imageability” of the urban elements of those towns was conditioned by the “memory of the place”: its edges were conditioned by the agricultural operations and by the relation with the natural environment; the paths, by their direct relation with the land, are used to trace out the lines of the village plan; its nodes which complete the structure as civic places in relation to the pedestrian routes; and the landmarks that close the experience of the local countryside without enforcing a romantic rhetoric.41

CAÑADA DE AGRA

The new village, Cañada de Agra, Albacete, lies in the irrigated area of the Hellín Canal some 7.5 km south of Hellín, a town in the Castilla-La Mancha autonomous region. Although the first traces of territorial planning go back to 1958, the Plan General de Colonización (Colonization Master Plan), of this First Sector was approved in September 1962, after being submitted and signed by Fernández del Amo in May 1962.42

The topographic situation of Cañada de Agra, between the road that links the three new irrigated small towns “bordered by a hill, on whose slopes lies [...] on the foot of a steep gradient” is used to create a road system with a perimeter road and branching roads that end in a cul-de-sac (Figure 2).43 The plan was influenced by North American models such as Green Brook (which were mentioned in the Architecture Service’s report for Torres de Salinas) and also indirectly by the recent British “new towns.”44 But it also refers to the stipulations of the Instituto Nacional de la Vivienda already applied by the INC in Esquivel, Seville (Alejandro de la Sota, 1952) or in Llanos de Sotillo, Jaén (José Antonio Corrales, 1956).45 In Cañada de Agra this traffic system is used to solve the differences in levels between streets with a longitudinal axis of residential blocks by means of terraces for aiding the separation of yards and homes. In short, the efficiency of the circulation assists the other civic functions and reinforces the use of topography as the village’s sign of identity.

Due to the placement of the residential blocks “on terraces at different levels” so that each row has something like an enclosed yard for animals and agricultural outbuildings, and another for the house and the yard, the pedestrian’s route to access their houses follows another two pedestrian streets running parallel at the same level to the corresponding street.46 The structure of Cañada de Agra, thus, is based on a real system of pedestrian routes not only as a continuous street grid, but also to provide efficient circulation between the residential housing and the social activities. As wheeled traffic is restricted in the cul-de-sacs, the pedestrian space can open towards the central axis of the composition “with more moderate slopes,” being an area defined for a succession of open areas and buildings for community life.47 This series of spaces forms the village grid and creates its character as an actual continuous system, almost uniform in plan but ambiguous in relation with the built mass
Figure 2. Cañada de Agra. General Plan.

Figure 3. Cañada de Agra. Urban structure (from left to right, top to bottom): a) pedestrian and housing; b) pedestrian and open areas; c) pedestrian and buildings; d) pedestrian and community life areas.
of volumes, in a naturalistic version of the British Crescent. Thus, the subtle structure of the town hides behind the perspective relations that connect the urban nodes, the main spaces for meeting people, the civic centre, the church atrium and the schools. From the lower level of the village hall, arcades to the lowest level open to the agrarian landscape, the space ascends in a “Y”: to the right (direction of the hill) towards the vague area of the schools; to the left, to the church atrium, a place for the meeting of the congregation. The hillside is stretched within the urban configuration, between the valley and the summits, between the main focuses: the square and the monumental tower of the

(Figure 3). If in Vegaviana these empty spaces were given a special character as natural countryside, here they reflect their urban function as restored green areas “rising among buildings, little forests of poplars and pine trees,” paved into the main surroundings and articulated in accordance with the natural topography and the architectural volumes.48

On the whole, the artificial landscape that forms the collective space results in a complex network of relations and ambiguities, where the rows of houses are placed so as to maintain the level and, at the same time, show a rhythmical succession
church. But the landscape also draws strength as a subtle structure, homogeneous and diverse, thanks to the relations between urban landmarks and public buildings that are hidden and revealed, so that one can sense them as sequences of focal points that stretch the hillside from the uppermost point, the level of the church tower, to the lower level of the Civic Centre’s esplanade, before climbing the hill slope again towards the Schools (Figure 4).

To preserve this sense of a common chain of places, both the housing and the civic buildings share a sober formal attitude, in accordance with the valley landscape. Thus, the Civic Centre integrating town hall, social center, health services, shops and crafts, creates a homogeneous square defined by three double storey porticoed sides, closed by a fourth side open to the countryside through a simple colonnade (Figure 5). The housing rows, on the other hand, have double faced horizontal linear fronts: to the pedestrian areas, a domestic sequence of human scaled openings and entranceways (Figure 6); to the traffic alleys, a rhythmic chain of gables and curved walls (Figure 7). As for the high tower, a fundamental and identifying landmark of the village within the surrounding territory, it is interesting to study its evolution during the project. In the first sketches dated July 1959 the tower’s height is quite
especially in this case, where the topographic situation of the church becomes dominant” (Figure 8).  

In this way the grid is neutralized, which could become a labyrinth in its triple tension, although more balanced and rational due to the repetitive succession of the series of houses. From a historical perspective, one could also foresee the symbolic break, that began at the beginning of the decade, between politics and religion (Regime and Church), expressed exceptionally in the INC’s towns since “the
for its ensuing appropriation by the inhabitant’s activities and uses, away from the control of the INC. As it happens in the Matter paintings of Antoni Tapies, the hillside “on the slope of a hill dominated by a circle of small hills around the valley which the Institute has transformed with the lines of the different levels and terraces. Everything remains empty, bare of vegetation, with the ochre, brown and pink colours of a great amorphous substance in which the village has been crystallized in its geometrical and rhythmic volumes in the same tones” (Figure 11).

In its sensibility towards nature, Cañada de Agra shares with Vegaviana the use of the open space as landscape, affording it a leading place in the collective image of the village. That which in the Cáceres’s project could indicate a discovery, in Albacete is the explicit intention of the village’s design, where the social environment is linked to the physical, both emotionally and symbolically (Figure 10). If in the first example we find a certain naiveté in keeping small examples of vegetation, now the habitat appears more abstract, simple topography to be developed ready for its landscape design and

religious buildings are reasonably far away from the rest of the Civic Centre” (Figure 9).

Fernández del Amo confessed some years later, “only abstract art taught me how to see the plain and naked beauty in the lands of La Mancha.” In fact, in abstract art, a patch of colour
is seen as leading to abstraction in opposition to the line, with its inherent figurative function, to represent, to pretend to be real (Figure 12).

PARALLEL EXPERIENCES

After the Second World War few states were able to carry out new projects in rural colonization similar in size and impact as those implemented years before in Fascist Italy. One of the most influential examples in international architecture (including, of course, the planning of rural spaces) was the new town of Nagele. Located in the Dutch Noordoospolder, its development is linked with the creation of new farming lands, claimed from the North Sea in this case. Due to the strong winds in the area, one of the indispensable elements of the design was the plantation of a small protecting forest, which would dominate the surrounding perspective of the urban nucleus and would isolate it from the agrarian landscape. From the first projects of 1947, the architects of the group De 8 en Opbouw “considered the artificial landscape of the polder as an interesting context for Nagele,” an attitude as regards public space that would be maintained in subsequent projects. On the other hand, in the urban structure of the third project...
submitted by Aldo van Eyck in 1954, the building lines are described:

...here they are all different and combine to form a complex, non-repetitive composition. As with Lohse, the simple basic elements (rows of housing of three different lengths) combine to form continually changing variants of the same theme: the centrifugally-composed unit with an inner zone conceived as either a public garden or a square with trees. The relation between the units is not only associative (their mutual similarity and their similarity to the whole that they make up) but also contextual. All seven units are situated outside the ring roads, but each of them extends across it with one or more houses penetrating into the central space.58

Nevertheless, the real colonization of the territory during the post-war period in Europe was suburban. Due to the formal similarities with the work of Fernández del Amo (only accidental in a way)
and, specially, for its architectural transcendence, one could mention the housing developments of the Danish architect Jørn Utzon, such as Kingo Houses in Helsingør (1956-1960) or the houses in Fredensborg (1962-1963), all of them designed “considering the scale, the movements, the wishes and tastes of the users; expressing a wish for integrating spontaneity.”

Much closer to the INC’s towns would be José Antonio Coderch’s project for Torre Valentina, a new kind of colonization for tourist uses: it was a sort of model of planning far from the rural environment and formally similar to the suburban, which would become invasive in Spanish coastal areas. However, in Coderch’s project the main elements would be the landscape and the empty spaces:

The narrow houses are terraced vertically, so as each of them has at least one living room, one bedroom and one terrace facing the sea, and also to be better adapted to the terrain […] Streets are below the houses to prevent people
circulating in front of the living rooms and to allow children to play when it is raining [...] Areas with trees between the houses allow view of trees opposite the living room to be enjoyed. Open spaces extend the views upwards from the hotel square. All covered streets lead to open spaces.  

CONCLUSIONS

The project of the new town in Cañada de Agra planned by Fernández del Amo and developed by the INC constitutes one of the master works of 20th century rural planning, as shown by its declaration as an Asset of Cultural Interest, BIC. In spite of the relative isolation of Spanish architecture as regards the critical discussions of the modern movement, in its development one can identify positive solutions for problems of scale, the social context and its identification with the land, characteristic of the different alternatives in post-war Europe. In the 21st century, the sensitivity of this village in relation with the surrounding territory is still a referent for “the promotion of non-urban collective housing” and its contemporary challenges.  

Although in the middle of 20th century classic ruralism falls into a crisis as a discipline, in parallel with
the development of massive suburbanization and the disappearance of Western plans of agrarian colonization, the rural environment still constitutes a reality opposing the urban growth of our planet: “In contrast with the shrinkage of village and small towns, there are many rural regions, villages, and small towns, which can prosper from establishing a good working economy in a rural network.” In this regard the example of Cañada de Agra appears today as one of the swan songs that, leaving aside historical distance, can “serve as a medium of collective identity and culture for entire regions—representing an image of Heimat and the longing for a whole-some world.” This proposed analysis, providing an open graphic method, attempts to identify the factors of its future critical relevance.

Notes and References
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