

INSIGHTS

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LA CITTÀ GLOBALE

La condizione urbana
come fenomeno pervasivo

THE GLOBAL CITY

The urban condition
as a pervasive phenomenon

a cura di

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LANDSCAPE AND HERITAGE, THE SIEGE OF THE ALHAMBRA FOR SPECULATION AND TOURISM

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Abstract

During the 20th century the surroundings of the Alhambra have been subjected to an urbanising pressure that has resulted in the construction of many roads, car parks, hotels, houses and cultural spaces. Today the severity of the siege of the Alhambra is minimised by hoteliers, politicians and architects who, in a city as saturated as Granada, see the surroundings of the Alhambra as open to new buildings that can facilitate more tourism.

Keywords

Tourism; Urban speculation; Heritage

Introduction

The old palatine city of the Alhambra sits on a hill that, like a ship of 740 meters in length, lines its bow towards the city. To the north, a wooded hillside falls into a deep valley carved by the Darro River, which separates it from the Albaicín neighbourhood. The forest, used as a royal hunting ground until the 17th century and later as a wood reserve, was never invaded by houses. The Darro River reaches the place meandering through a steep valley with orchards and forests that comes into contact with the city without any suburbs.

To the south, a ravine separates the Alhambra from the hills of the Mauror and the Mártires. The ravine was occupied from the second half of the sixteenth century by some wild paths embellished by fountains and crosses. The narrow paths of the avenues were transformed during the 19th century into wide walks with roundabouts and benches [Barrios Rozúa 2013, 303-324]. On the other hand, the hills bordering the citadel formed a long pass that extended from the Torres Bermejas to the convento de los Mártires, enjoying, from the footpath and the walk that crossed the steep edges, of wide views towards the city, the fertile Vega (the meadow) and Sierra Nevada mountains. In the mid-19th century the convent was demolished and replaced by the house of a rich banker, who planted extensive gardens in what had been orchards, something that did not substantially alter the configuration of the place.

On the northeastern side of the Alhambra a narrow ravine separated the citadel from the stepped orchards of a palace of Muslim origin, the Generalife. Above this palace

survived the foundations of the Castle of Santa Elena, located in the slope of the Cerro del Sol, an extensive and bare hill where were interesting archaeological remains scattered. The wake of that ship that is the Alhambra, extends towards the southwest as a wide ascending plateau that culminated in the Alixares, a privileged viewpoint towards the valley of the river Genil and Sierra Nevada in which, in Muslim times, there was a palace. In 1805, a cemetery for the city was placed in that area in order to replace the small intramural cemeteries of the parishes. It was a ventilated and distant place where the small cemetery did not cause any impact, since it was not even surrounded by a wall. The extensive area between the Alhambra and the necropolis was occupied by rainfed crops.

The wide perimeter that we have just described was enclosed by wooden palisades by the Napoleonic troops between 1810 and 1812. No army came to besiege the place, which remained as a rustic and agricultural territory with the exceptions already noted, and some more of scarce significance [García Pulido 2013, 14-18]. But since the beginning of the 20th century, attacks have continued unabated to this day, facilitated by the opening of ever wider streets and roads. The siege has been carried out by the hotel industry eager to exploit the possibilities of a monument that attracted more and more tourists, a local government moved by diverse interests, and by people in love with the marvellous views. Some attacks have been rejected, but the repeated incursions have been taking away land that will probably never be returned to agriculture and Nature. The offensive not only does not stop, but threatens to escalate.

History of a siege

In 1870, the Alhambra was declared a national monument; a year before the surroundings of the Alhambra ceased to be under the jurisdiction of the State and many lands began to be sold to individuals at the same time that the promenades and their surroundings were under the jurisdiction of the City Council. A dangerous scenario opened up, especially when the first railway to Granada arrived in 1874 and put an end to the slow and troubled itineraries of romantic travellers. The modern mass tourism can be said to be born in the 1890s, as can be seen in a local newspaper that echoes the arrival of large groups of American tourists arriving by boat in Malaga and travelling by train to the city to spend three days during which they visit the Alhambra, the Cathedral and the monastery of La Cartuja. That is why they proposed the first projects to communicate the Alhambra with the centre by a tram, which finally came to fruition in 1907. Just where the tram line ended, the orientalist Palace Hotel (Fig. 1), the equivalent of the Excelsior hotel of Venice, opened three years later, a huge building that eclipsed the Alhambra on the south side [Piñar Samos, Giménez Yanguas 2019, 143-146].

A few meters away from the hotel the City Council gave permission to build the spectacular Carmen de Rodríguez Acosta (1916-1925), a house owned by a painter son of a powerful family of bankers. Fortunately, although the house was out of scale, its articulation and successful compositional design made it a relevant work of Spanish architecture of the time, halfway between a late romanticism and a formal rationalism. The construction of the Hotel Palace and the Carmen de Rodríguez Acosta opened the door



1: Hotel Alhambra Palace [Photograph by the author 2001].

for the entire cornice that went from the Torres Bermejas to the Carmen de los Mártires to be gradually occupied by houses, and the passers-by lost the beautiful views. During the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera (1923-1930) and the Second Republic (1931-1936) the Alhambra was in the hands of the best restorer, Leopoldo Torres Balbás, very sensitive to the scenic and picturesque values of the monument, and whose criteria of restoration were analogous to those of Gustavo Giovannoni [Vílchez Vílchez 1988, 29-41]. Under the direction of this architect they improved the walks and they initiated the expropriation for the demolition of some housing of the surroundings of the Alhambra and the Siete Suelos hotel, which concealed part of the southern wall.

After the Civil War the city suffered a long post-war period in which tourism sank as a result of World War II. This led to the regrettable decision to abolish the tram to the Palace Hotel (1944). What should have been a conjectural decision was adopted as a definitive cancellation, and the Alhambra lost a splendid means of connection with the city, of little landscaping impact.

Although poverty and economic stagnation would be the tone of the Autarchy (1939-1959), the Alhambra began to recover strongly the tourist impulse, which would accelerate with the period of rapid economic expansion known as *Desarrollismo* (Developmentalism, 1960-1977). One of the fundamental engines of the “economic miracle” was the construction industry, which was freed almost from any administrative entanglement and that, without taking into account the social interest, the atmosphere of the historic cities and the landscape values, developed in a brutal way. Another engine was tourism, which strongly promoted the construction of infrastructures and hotels.

In this climate of unbridled growth of tourism and construction, the people in charge of the heritage conservation, with the architect Francisco Prieto-Moreno at the helm, put themselves at the forefront of the tourism development of the place. Already in 1957, this architect, faced with the problem of an increasing circulation of private vehicles, considered the possibility of dismantling and reconstructing the Puerta de las Granadas, remarkable triumphal arch raised in the time of the Emperor Charles V, in another place because it obstructed the passage of the tourist buses [Esteban Chaparria 2012, 245]. This point was not reached, but a far-reaching decision was made to locate a parking lot next to the Generalife on a plot that until then had been an olive grove. From this parking lot, the historic doors of the Alhambra were far away and Prieto-Moreno built a bridge (1973) (Fig. 2) that jumped over the wall, an urban nonsense that is still in operation and that leads to the majority of tourists accessing the citadel from a higher level than this. Moreover, this access has as a consequence that a good part of tourists does not even perceive that the Alhambra and the Generalife are different things.



2: Bridge for the entrance of tourists in the Alhambra built in 1973 [Photograph by the author 2017].



3: Hotel Alixares, parking and Nuevos Museos [Photograph by the author, 2017].

To attract more tourism to the surroundings of the Alhambra, Francisco Prieto-Moreno built an open-air theater in 1954 and, for the entertainment of the spectators, he drew gardens inspired by the Islamic riad [Romero Gallardo 2014, 178-214]. All this intervention was made at the cost of suppressing a medieval garden of the Generalife. The orientation towards the tourism of the theater was made very clear by Prieto-Moreno himself: «the enclosure of our first monument» needs a place to «adequately attend to Spanish and foreign visitors» united by «the common condition of tourists» and «to hold festivals of refined artistic quality, to which the atmosphere of the Alhambra provides a unique setting» [Prieto-Moreno 1954, 23].

In 1975, the Manuel de Falla Auditorium was built next to Paseo de los Mártires, a concert hall that sought proximity to the Alhambra and the house-museum of the composer Manuel de Falla. That is, it was thought of tourists first than in citizens, reason why it is an auditorium of very uncomfortable access that mobilizes a lot of transport whenever there is a concert.

The commitment to install attractions for tourism in the surroundings of the Alhambra made another qualitative leap with the decision of the reckless architect Francisco Prieto-Moreno to build four museums close to the Generalife (Fig. 3). This project would move away more than ever the museums from the citizens of Granada, but would

put them within the reach of tourists who would arrive by car and bus¹. The buildings were erected between 1973 and 1979. Fortunately, they were never used for this purpose, being used as restoration workshops, warehouses, archive and library.

The influx of tourists attracted hoteliers. In 1969, just 50 meters from the ticket offices of the Alhambra, the Hotel Guadalupe was built. But the great scandal of the time was the cession to a hotel company of the house with large gardens called “Carmen de los Mártires” – a municipal property since 1958 – to build a large hotel (1974). The operation, openly prevaricating, raised a huge controversy in the city and was paralyzed by the bankruptcy of the developer company when it had already made a serious destruction in the building and its gardens.

No less surprising is that the Council of the Alhambra decided to rebuild in 1966 the Castle of Santa Elena, a Muslim fortress located above the Alhambra, of which only archaeological remains were left. The “new” castle was intended to be used as a restaurant and the possibility of communicating it by means of a cable car with the hill of San Miguel Alto, where they planned to build a big hotel. Fortunately, neither the restaurant nor the cable car were made, but there was an unfinished reconstruction of the castle that, abandoned, collapsed thirty years later.

The Alhambra for mass tourism

Democracy came in 1978 with a sector of public opinion critical of the landscape damage caused by the *Desarrollismo*, but with a majority of society educated in political passivity and seduced by the wealth generated by the construction activity. For that reason, the *Desarrollismo* would not finish with the end of the dictatorship of Franco, but, mitigated, has continued during the democracy. The two real estate bubbles, burst in 1992 and in 2008, which had serious economic and social consequences, are the proof. That the Alhambra ran the risk of being completely surrounded by houses was made clear when the developer Ávila Rojas announced the imminent construction of 230 single-family homes just a few dozen meters from the Alhambra and the Generalife (1983-1984). The urbanization Los Alijares was to be built on a large estate that, suspiciously, had not been included in the protected perimeter of the monument (defined in 1978) (Fig. 4), and had all the legal permits. The scandal that aroused in public opinion forced the institutions to paralyze it and pay for the state twice as much as it had cost the developer.

These plots of land acquired at such a high price were destined to build a huge parking lot inaugurated in 1996, which was criticized for the excessive use of concrete in water channels and pergolas (Fig. 3). The small ticket office at the entrance to the monument was replaced by some controversial concrete and glass buildings. This big parking lot was accessed by an open road on the slope to the river Genil, which, projected in 1975, was not made until shortly before the opening of the new parking. On the other hand, in

¹ «Ideal», 22 March 1972 y 22 November 1974.



4: Map of the protected perimeter of the Alhambra in 1978 [Boletín Oficial del Estado].

2004 the theater of the Generalife was reconstructed and expanded, an intervention that would be criticized by ICOMOS. This organism also reported negatively on the project of the Council of the Alhambra to build a few meters from the Alhambra a buried building of more than 10,000 square meters to house an underground car park, box offices, cafes, shops, etc. The project was discarded after the inevitable controversy.

While the institutions did everything possible to facilitate mass tourism, the hoteliers struggled to approach the monument. In 1982, the great hotel Los Alixares was built on the Paseo de la Sabika, which earned a reprimand from UNESCO to the Spanish authorities (Fig. 3). On the other hand, the Hotel Washington Irving has been the object of an extension concluded in 2016 and recently an expansion of the Hotel Palace was approved with a spa and more rooms, which would mean the urbanization of a hillside

until then rustic. This work was paralyzed by the discovery of tombs and two Muslim cisterns, but it will surely be resumed in the near future².

The City Council is also responsible for the cemetery, which continues to grow and attract traffic. Far from considering the creation of an alternative cemetery and relax the pressure on the surroundings and boundaries of the Alhambra, the mayor press the conservative institutions of heritage to authorize new expansions, because the last (2006-2008) has already been small. The logic indicates that the cemetery either moves to another place or will continue to grow in size and density.

The City Council is also the protagonist of another element of pressure towards the Alhambra. Some mayors have considered that the communication of the Alhambra with the city should be facilitated by mechanical means of transport such as funiculars, cable cars or elevators, downplaying the irreversible landscape impact that they would have. Although these initiatives have not prospered at the moment, they reappear periodically because the hotel industry considers that a good part of the Alhambra's visitors do not pass through Granada and do not generate wealth in hotels and restaurants. In 2005, a study by the La Caixa bank and the Alhambra Council made it clear that only 26.7% of the Alhambra visitors were single-day tourists, and that the others spent the night in the city³. If the number of tourists entering the Alhambra has risen from 2.1 million in 1998 to 2.7 in 2018, the increase of visitors in the city has been considerably higher⁴. The Alhambra cannot accommodate more tourists because the limit is 300 people every half hour. The difference between the number of tourists visiting Alhambra and the number of tourists arriving in Granada will be bigger.

Although the tourist pressure has always been increasing, not everything has been setbacks for the defenders of the surroundings of the Alhambra. To the victory that supposed to stop the construction of the urbanization Los Alijares, we must add other achievements, such as the restoration of the Carmen de los Mártires and its extensive gardens, which today constitute a magnificent public park at the gates of the Alhambra. The regional government of Andalusia has also successfully completed the acquisition of buildings and private estates (Carmen de los Catalanes, Hotel Reuma, etc) that have been incorporated into the protected perimeter. On the other hand, the new accesses made it possible to close the Gomérez hill to traffic (in 1996, private traffic was banned and in 2006 urban taxis and minibuses stopped passing).

Conclusions

Tourism is an opportunity for heritage since it provides resources for the restoration of monuments and warns about the economic importance of preserving them. But in turn it can become a threat when the historic city is seen by the developers as a business

² «Granada Hoy», 18 November 2011.

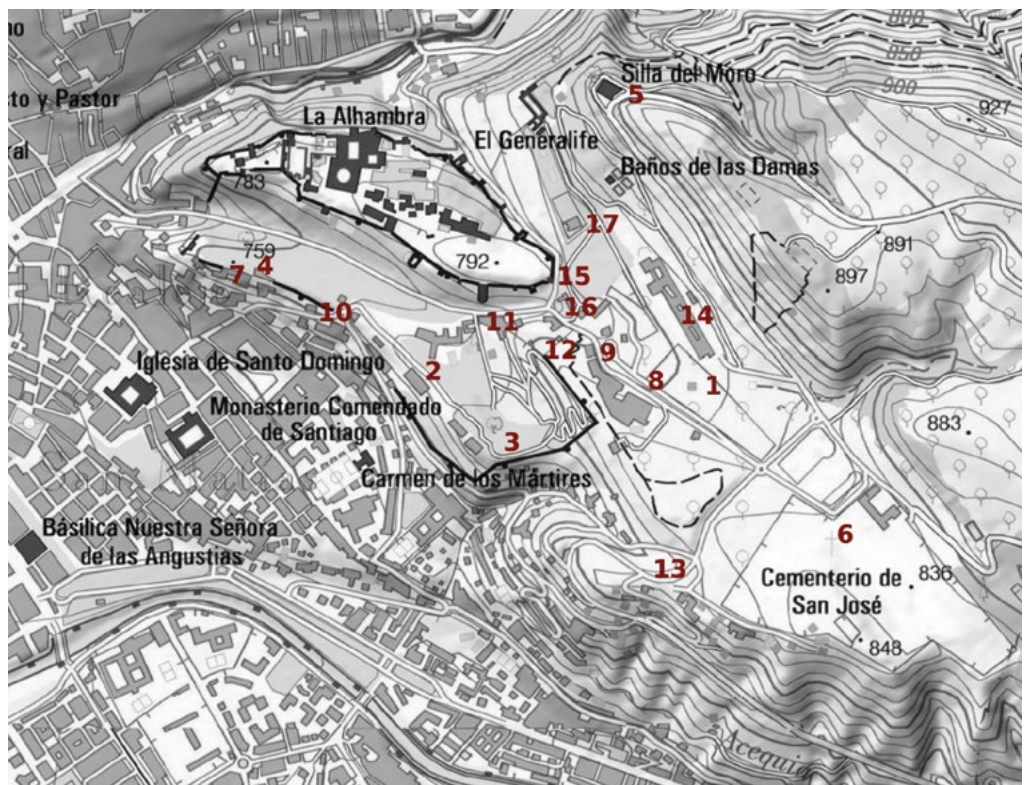
³ «Andalucía 24 horas», 29 September 2005.

⁴ «El Independiente de Granada», 2 October 2017 and «Granada Hoy», 23 January 2019.

opportunity in which everyone fights for their plot without paying attention to the common good. The construction of hotels and restaurants in the vicinity is the most obvious manifestation of that predatory desire.

The institutions, faced with the difficulty of managing a rapidly growing flow of tourists, set themselves the objective of facilitating the fastest and most direct access possible, and made decisions that time soon proved unsatisfactory. An important part of the tourists goes by car to the Alhambra from the Costa del Sol, and ignores the city. The alternatives that are proposed to correct this situation are new threats, because there are many pressures that insist on facilitating a massive access of tourists by mechanical means that would have a serious impact on the boundaries of a monumental site that owes a good part of its attractiveness to the surrounding landscape.

Preserving the environments of the Alhambra is the best tourist investment. The limit of visits inside the palace has been reached, but the wonderful views offered by the exteriors of the Alhambra have no access limit (Fig. 5).



5: Map of the Alhambra in 2019 [Instituto Geográfico Nacional and Juan Manuel Barrios]. 1. Aparcamientos (1996); 2. Auditorio Manuel de Falla (1975); 3. Carmen de los Mártires (hotel 1974); 4. Carmen Rodríguez Acosta (1916-1925); 5. Castillo de Santa Elena (reconstrucción 1966); 6. Cementerio (1800-2006); 7. Fundación Gómez-Moreno (1972); 8. Hotel Alixares (1982); 9. Hotel Guadalupe (1969); 10. Hotel Palace (1910); 11. Hotel Washington Irving (reapertura en 2016); 12. Museo y hospedería de Meermans (1910-1930); 13. Nuevo acceso (1996); 14. Nuevos Museos (1973-1979); 15. Puente de acceso para los turistas (1973); 16. Taquillas (1997); 17. Teatro del Generalife (1954, ampliado en 2004).

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