

A SINGULAR BUILDING: THE UNIVERSITY OF CERVERA



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ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT BUILDINGS SHOWING THE PROGRESSIVE DEVELOPMENT OF CLASSICIST CRITERIA IN CATALAN BAROQUE ARCHITECTURE IS THE UNIVERSITY OF CERVERA.

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One good way of understanding architecture in Catalonia during the baroque period starts with an analysis of the political and artistic reality of the years between the beginning of the seventeenth century and the culminating point of the enlightened thinking of the end of the eighteenth century. The Catalan architectural and urbanistic outlook of this period undoubtedly reflects the way in which the evolution of these artistic manifestations

depended on the dialectic generated by the introduction of new aesthetic and architectural forms –either imposed, or assimilated by a “natural” process of affinity– and the continuity of the country’s architectural tradition, deeply rooted in the preservation of an administrative practice linked to a system of guilds that had been in existence since the Middle Ages.

On top of the impact of classicist trends developed at the end of the sixteenth

century and the beginning of the seventeenth –such as the Camp de Tarragona school, led by the architect Pere Blay–, there appeared subsequently the effect of Churrigueresque art, which spread from the capital of the kingdom and mainly affected the more decorative elements of buildings –that is, facades, altarpieces and other, similar ornamental elements.

In spite of the historiographic prejudices of emblematic researchers in Catalan



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art, the baroque was widely accepted by the public, as it made it easier to adapt the building to the tastes of the customer and of the general public than did the demonstrations of architectural sobriety and "classicism" normally linked to the unindividualized undertakings of institutional representations. In this sense it is wrong to maintain the idea of "racial permanence" in the Catalan architecture of the period in question. The reasons for the more modest state of construction in the Principality during the seventeenth century, from the creative point of view, are to be found instead in the lack of outstanding figures and the limitations imposed by a centralist political climate, and in a discreet socio-economic growth; largely decisive aspects when it comes to establishing the stylistic "poverty" of Catalan architecture during this period.

The chances of an integration of baroque forms from Europe under the government of the Archduke Charles of Austria –whether from the Germanic countries via Valencia, or else from Italy through the scenographic and architectural contributions of Ferran Galli, "Bibiena"– were reduced by a new military conflict: the War of Succession. In this case, the victory of the grandson of Louis XIV, Philip of Anjou, brought support for the new architectural style from the French world. This classicist model from beyond the Pyrenees stimulated

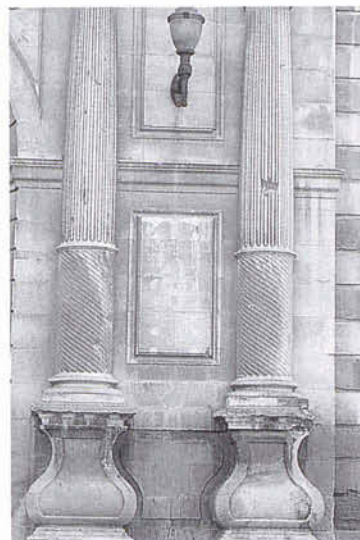
the emergence of architecture in which foreign forms played with the essence of sixteenth century Hispanic classicism and the survival of the Catalan building tradition, which can be seen most clearly not in the "visible" details but in the confirmation of local building techniques.

It is in this sense that an important change took place in the world of baroque Catalan architecture. Because of the Spanish Crown's need to unify its territory, it carried out, from a new, French-style centralist conception, a building experience of great importance throughout the realm, especially in Catalonia. The work of planning and building the new "Bourbon" architecture fell to those professionals who were best qualified to raise constructions suited to the above mentioned status: the military engineers.

At this moment construction in Catalonia could be arranged under three general headings; religious architecture, either carried out by local master builders or else by those monks with suitable training –like the draughtsman Fra Josep de la Concepció–; "civil" architecture, promoted by the local authorities or private individuals with the intervention of the municipal architects named by the councillors; and the architecture undertaken under the direct control of the Ministries of War and of Finance. It is interesting to note that while the religious and civic

buildings initiated by monastic communities and cathedral chapters, on one hand, and by local authorities and private individuals, on the other, stuck mainly to the traditional directives of Catalan baroque aesthetics, the projects and works promoted by the Crown in the "periphery" showed stylistic tendencies directed at a more classicist conception of architecture. Catalonia's inclusion in the "periphery", not only on the territorial level, but also culturally and artistically, becomes even more evident with the creation of the *Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando* in Madrid in 1752. It is also interesting to note that the very essence of classicism consists in the annihilation of all that is individual, regional or national, and at the same time, in the predominance of universality which succeeds with the imposition of academism.

One of the buildings that best illustrates the progressive evolution of classicist criteria in Catalan baroque architecture is the University of Cervera. The establishment of an interaction between traditional Catalan practices and the professionalism from the building experience of the military engineers within their field of action gave rise to this new architectural hybrid which in the case of Catalonia produced examples as striking and interesting as the district of Barceloneta and the church of Sant Agustí Nou, in Barcelona, the New



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Cathedral of Lleida, and the University of Cervera, amongst others. The change, evident not only in Vitruvian concepts of solidity, functionality and aesthetics, but also in the reform of traditional working relations, promoted the development of stylistic languages that could hardly succeed within traditional Catalan architecture itself.

The University of Cervera shows the coexistence and the modulation of varying typological concepts and stylistic parameters: basic planimetric projection starting from Hispanic monastic architecture and taking as its model the Escorial –as can be observed in the design of the arsenal of the Barcelona Citadel– and the influence of the French and Flemish palaces and *hôtels*; the use of elements from military architecture, with the “bastions” at the corners and the conception of the central structure outside the main facade as a reinterpretation of the so-called “guard-house”. And all expressed in a mixed style falling somewhere between the structural, functional and decorative premises provided by the military engineers, reflecting their training according to French, Flemish and, some time later, Italian models.

The particular interest of a building like the University of Cervera can be found, from the architectural point of view, in subsequent modifications to the floor-plan and elevation as a result of new

reinterpretations by other engineers, and in the introduction of differentiating elements by local master builders in the design and the practical execution of the works: either through the preservation of typically Catalan building techniques, or through the preference for a more baroque art or, at an advanced stage in the building, because of a bold adoption of aesthetic criteria within the imposed academic classicism. In this respect, over the course of time there is a definite evolution and a succession of structural and stylistic variations, from the original project of 1718, drawn up by the engineer Francesc de Montaigu and followed with few variations under the direction of the Barcelona master builder Francesc Soriano between 1720 and 1745 –with the tendency to accentuate baroque taste on the frontispiece–, to the change to be seen during the reign of Ferdinand VI in favour of “academization” and an emphasis on the overall classicist spirit, which favoured a design on the interior facade that stuck more closely to the classical order, in this case Ionic, and the use of unquestionably classicist elements of composition –a pediment with allegorical tympanum decoration, balustrades, spherical crowning, filials and incense-burners. As regards the interior, the change in the directional sense in the emblematic spaces of the early projects –such as the chapel or the staff hall–,

towards a more homogeneous concept of space as regards the proportions on the plans presented in 1751 by the Director of Engineers of the Principality, Miquel Marín, represented the adoption of the emerging academic classicist ideas from the middle of the eighteenth century.

The University of Cervera, then, is a singular building which can help to illustrate the progressive development of architectural taste in Catalonia from a classicist concept marked by the functional design of the Bourbon military engineers and modified by the baroque contributions of the Catalan master-builders who intervened in their construction, towards the profusion of a more direct classical language, with the use of seventeenth century French and Flemish typologies (church of the Barcelona Citadel, designed by the Engineer General Jordi Pròsper Verboom), or through explicit references to the Vignollesque Italian baroque (the church of Sant Miquel del Port in the Barceloneta district, designed by the engineer Pedro Martín Zermelo), or with greater academic rigour, such as the University of Cervera itself and many public, religious and private buildings (College of Surgery in Barcelona, designed by the architect Ventura Rodríguez), (Palau Larrard in Barcelona), which were built in Catalonia during the second half of the eighteenth century. ●