

# Madrid as a Palimpsest

By Andrea Ramirez-Hinojosa

*“The site was a palimpsest, as was all the city, written, erased, rewritten”*

— Teju Cole, *Open City*

## **Introduction**

Madrid is like a palimpsest. According to Merriam-Webster a palimpsest is a very old document on which the original writing has been erased and replaced with new writing: something that has changed over time and shows evidence of that change. Madrid is a keen example of this definition. The city of Madrid has an extensive history that resulted in many layers of cultures throughout the centuries. The best way to understand how Madrid is like a palimpsest is to focus on the variety of architecture and urban art; furthermore the best way to see Madrid’s architecture is explore Madrid via walking.

## **Defining a Palimpsest**

The word ‘palimpsest’ lends itself well to metaphorical view. Madrid can be compared to a palimpsest because of the evolution of its urban landscape and inspired urban art. Each time a new culture emerged in Madrid the previous state was somewhat erased yet some architecture still remained, each layer builds on each other. This effect emphasizes the historical remnants or memorial traces of the city’s history most importantly through the various architectural buildings and styles. In an article by Daniel-Gabriel Vâlceanu he discusses how urban landscapes act as palimpsest. Vâlceanu agrees “the spatial development stages of urban systems represent the result of their evolution over time” (Vâlceanu 17). Urban landscapes such as seen in Madrid can

be perceived as a palimpsest comprising of different elements specific to historical eras, immigration influxes, etcetera.

Urban life is altered according to temporal factors of the city that can be ultimately seen most predominantly in the city's edifices. Each time a different set of people came to Madrid they left their touch on the city for this reason Madrid has become a unique and eclectic city to visit. Vâlceanu also articulates "the concept of urban palimpsest can be centered on the urban tissue components as: buildings; image of the city stages of spatial dynamics of the town during the reference period; territorial development factors..." (Vâlceanu 18). Physical transformation occurs in urban system as a result of economic, political, and technological processes and thus different and new values, styles, and cultures can be seen. The palimpsest incorporates memoires and mementos, which further contribute to structure the city.

### **A Brief History of Madrid**

Madrid has evolved from a small provincial town to a world capital and leading city in Europe. Madrid was almost surely founded as 'Magerite' (which meant 'running water' in Arabic) by the Arabs. The first historical record of Madrid "dates from the ninth century, when it was ruled by the Emir Muhammad I of Cordoba. The remains of Arab walls in what is now the Cuesta de la Vega have recently been dug up" (Thomas 7). Parts of these walls can still be seen in what is today Muhammad I Park, near the Almudena Cathedral near the Royal Palace. Later King Philip II moved Spain's capital from Toledo to Madrid in 1561, he was advised to make "a stationary court, not the nomadic one which he himself had" (Thomas 1). Madrid was chosen because it was a central to all of Spain and had vast forests to expand the kingdom. The seventeenth century saw an expansion of Madrid with new modern buildings and greater populations. The Hapsburgs ruled over Spain from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century until the death of Charles II. The eighteenth and nineteenth century gave way to architecture heavily

influenced by Italian culture. Subsequently the inauguration of Bourbon Dynasty gave way to Philip V. Furthermore in the nineteenth century the dictator Francisco Franco established control of the state through the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) until his death in 1975. After Dictator Francisco Franco's death the monarchy was restored to Juan Carlos I of Spain (Felipe VI as his successor and current monarch). It was during this time when Spain began its transition toward democracy.

### **Architectural Styles of Madrid**

Many types of architectural styles exist in Madrid; these styles reflected the ruler's taste at that time. Rulers have imposed their taste on the city by erecting statutes, avenues, palaces, other edifices and thus modifying the urban landscape and the result is a superimposition of layers. In this way the city remembers moments, and recalls historical memories that helped shape the city to what it is today. Madrid's architecture has been influenced by different cultural groups of people, thus as Spain's monarchical dynasties shifted from Flanders to Austria to France, and so did the principle styles that formed every period. Madrid absorbed foreign influences and adapted them to the architecture amongst other things. Past eras and different cultural constructions are reflected in the city's architecture and even in today's urban art.

#### *Mudéjar Influence*

Muslim Madrid is mostly noticeable in the handful of brick Mudéjar towers. Mudéjar refers to the style of buildings constructed by Muslims living on Christian lands in pre-Inquisition Spain, it is a style of architecture developed by the Moors who did not convert to the Christian religion. Perhaps the oldest example of Muslim Madrid is seen in Muhammad I Park, where the remnants of some brick walls are still standing today. In 1502 the 'Catholic Monarchs' Fernando and Isabel "offered the Mudéjar, Muslims who remained in Christian territory after the Reconquista, the choice of conversion or expulsion" (Stewart 6). Mudéjar is best known for its

extensive use of brick as the primary building material, a good example of this is the Torres de Lujanes located in Plaza de la Villa where the layering of brick and concrete/stone is a very obvious feature, traditional to this style, practical, and economical. Other features associated with Mudejar buildings are the horseshoe arches on doors, windows, and other facades of buildings. Essentially mudéjar refers to the art and architecture left behind by the Moors that were passed on in the Christian areas after the Moor left.

After Muslim era the city almost doubled in size expanding its borders and building more churches. Many of these churches were built upon the ruins or foundations of previous places of worship. Although life in Madrid began to evolve after the Christian occupation in the eleventh century there were and are still had traces of Moorish inhabitants. Many mudéjar style buildings were destroyed and new ones were replaced during the 12<sup>th</sup> century as Madrid succumbed to Christianity. As a result, many local Muslims were forced to abandon their mosques to accommodate the new religion; thus these then mosques became Christian churches. A good representation of what churches of Madrid looked like in 1561 include San Nicolas and San Pedro, “both extensively restored and undoubtedly built over mosques to judged by their Mudéjar towers, all of the original churches fell victim to neglect over the centuries or, with the expanding wealth and dominance of the Church, were demolished to make way for grander edifice” (Stewart 13). These churches are both in Moorish style and have “fine, elegant, medieval towers”, that are reported to once have been used as mosques before the Christians (Thomas 7). The tall and slender bell tower of San Pedro is homologous to the Moorish towers of Avila and Segovia. Mudéjar is a hybrid of different elements developed from the Moorish, Jewish, and Christian cultures.



Figure 1 Iglesia San Pedro el Real, this was a more organic take on architecture. This building lacks symmetry, there is only one tower as opposed to two, and notice the windows are sporadically placed around the walls.



Figure 2 A close-up on the bell tower of San Pedro Church, notice the horseshoe-shaped window.



Figure 3 Part of the Torre de Lujanes building, notice the majority of the edifice is primarily red brick. The layering of brick was an inexpensive and practical way to build these edifices during this time.

*Modern Era 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> Century*

Two main European styles influenced the Modern Era in Madrid, Renaissance and Baroque. This was the time of the Hapsburg Dynasty. In a lecture by Professor Isabel Castro she discusses during this era Italy was the artistic example the world followed, even as Spain was a great political power (also during this time Madrid became the capital of Spain in 1561) (Castro 20). As a result of the two influences Madrid in particular developed its own style somewhat distinctive from European Renaissance or Baroque. At this time Madrid was more predominantly inspired by religion as opposed to ancient Roman architecture. Grey slate spires and brick-red facades best classify Hapsburg Madrid.

Notable constructions include Casa de la Villa in Plaza de la Villa on Calle Mayor and El Escorial a palace commissioned by Philip II. El Escorial is a building that exemplifies Spain's Renaissance; this building is a "combination temple, pantheon- mausoleum, study center, and meditation refuge" (Castro 25). Philip II demanded for this building to be simple in form and notable without arrogance or ostentation. El Escorial, as seen in Figure 5, reflects the deep connection between the State and religious affiliations because it was built to demonstrate the great power and wealth of the monarchy and as a place of reflection and prayer. The Plaza Mayor seen in Figures 4 is the epitome of Hapsburg Madrid; in fact the plaza was inspired in El Escorial. It became a place where "state ceremonies, fiestas, bullfights and public executions were held...by the seventeenth century Madrid was a world capital with a vibrant culture and artistic society" (Parsons 14). Plaza Mayor was the central location of Madrid where every possible public spectacle that would happen occurred in this area. The Santa Cruz Palace a former Prison, is now home to the foreign ministry, this building is also reminiscent of El Escorial with its tall spheres and red brick walls.



Figure 4 A main section of Plaza Mayor, this area was especially painted and designed to stand out amongst the other walls because this section is reserved for the royal family. This style is also symmetrical in design and reminiscent of El Escorial.

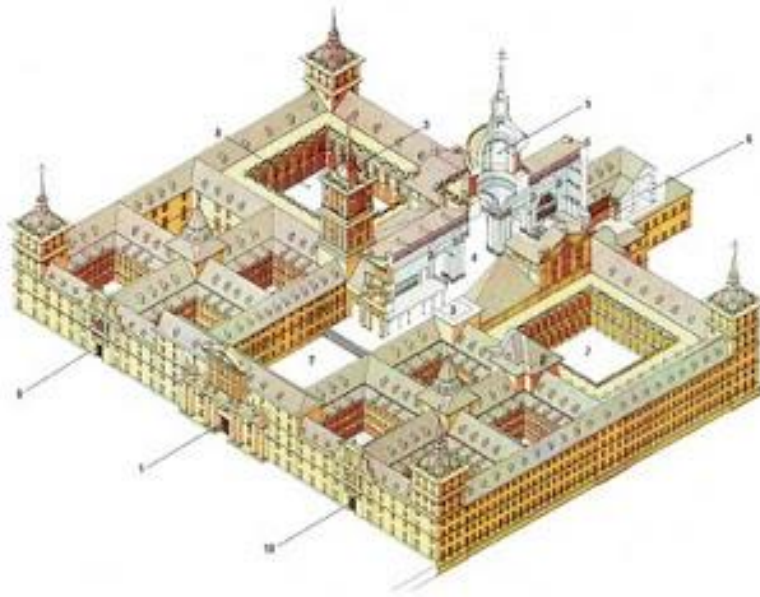


Figure 5 El Escorial. Digital Image. Art y Arquitectura. 09 Jan. 2010. Web.

### *Transition from Baroque to Neoclassical 18-20<sup>th</sup> Century*

After the conclusion of the Spanish Hapsburg dynasty, upon the death of Charles II, the arrival of the Bourbons took power. In 1714, the figure of Philip V came to reign and Madrid experienced noticeable changes. Philip's tastes were "inevitably the result of wider European influence...he swiftly commissioned the Palacio Real from Italian from Italian architects..."

(Parsons 15). Europeanism triumphed in Madrid, “the Fountains of Cibeles, Sabatini’s ceremonial gate the Puerta de Alcalá, and the scientific showcase of Spanish architect Juan de Villanueva’s Museo del Prado, and became the architectural face of a majestic and prosperous Madrid...” (Parsons 15). These buildings today are indeed amongst the most recognizable landmarks of Spain. Madrid’s architecture became more ornate under the Bourbon Dynasty as a result of Italian and French influences. Buildings such as the Museum of Natural Sciences (later the Prado Museum) and the Bank of Spain incorporated classical architecture along with a dash of eclectic feel gave the Bourbon Madrid a style of their very own. The “most characteristic eighteen-century buildings were however, intuitions of enlightenment, particularly those build during he reign of Charles III in the second half of the century” (Thomas 21). These buildings were constructed with a main motive of expressing wealth through grandeur and seek to impress the spectator.

Madrid amounts to an overall eclectic journey through the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. For example landmark buildings such as the Metrópolis building that splits Gran Vía with Calle Alcalá, the Plaza de España, the new modern additions to the Reina Sofia Museum, and the Almudena Cathedral. And finally the twentieth century combined many different styles and sort of summarized them to an eclectic style of its’ own. The Palacio de Cibeles as seen in Figure 7 is an example of the eclectic mix of different styles to construct a new look. Amongst these newly concocted ideas emerged a new layer adding to the Madrid palimpsest, urban art as noted in Figure 11. Much urban art is directly seen in public spaces all over Madrid. These spaces are forums where artists display their murals on the wall of the cityscape. Many times these murals are politically inclined and thus is a critic to something regarding the government.



Figure 6 Palacio de Cibeles, the former palace of communications.



Figure 7 View from the rooftop of the Palacio de Cibeles.



Figure 8 Inside ceiling view from Palacio de Cibeles. Notice the combination of styles of architecture, including the stained glass window at top, the arches, and elaborate borders.



Figure 9 Museo Reina Sofia alternative entrance; note the new and eclectic red paneling on the walls.



Figure 10 Mural by urban artist in Madrid b the name of Dingo.

## **Walking in Madrid**

In a lecture given at Harvard University, writer Teju Cole explains the difference between a *flâneur* vs. *derive*. He explains that a *flâneur* is a wanderer who goes through the city without a real plan, in a “footloose” kind of way. In comparison to the *derive* who has a more analytical approach to walking with greater intentions of learning something from their walks as opposed to aimlessly walking through. He recalls a time where he was on Wall Street and felt negative

vibes from the city later to learn that hundreds had been buried there, which accounted for that heavy feeling he had. Walking through any city is an important way to get deeper understanding of what the urban landscape looks like. Appreciating Madrid's unique architecture is best done through understanding the layers of culture that are been imbedded to the various edifices. Madrid is a city where one can easily navigate themselves through different neighborhoods and through walks along main streets. Walking in Madrid lends an opportunity to see buildings from a new perspective and gain a greater appreciation for the history of the city. Teju Cole he explains is especially drawn to urban art, marks, and scribbles on the urban landscape walls. This demonstrates how he is interpreting the city as a place where people come leave their mark and then inevitably once those people leave new people come and wipe away what was there to create their own "I was here" marker.

Madrid especially has evolved into a city that is very much pedestrian friendly and part of the pedestrian experience is wandering through the city. There is something Romantic about walking through a city and focusing time and attention to learning about the history of a place. The city of Madrid has many stories recount regarding it's historical past many of which can be easily seen through the practice of walking and observing the buildings. The history of Madrid dated back to the times of Muhammad to the present twentieth century urban art demonstrates the city as a palimpsest. Although everyone's walk through Madrid will take a different route, it is clear to see how Madrid is like a palimpsest.

## **Conclusion**

Madrid is like a palimpsest because of the different layering that has occurred throughout its history. This layering can be mostly seen in the variety of architecture throughout the city. All the eras brought forth a new style and now live side by side as a historical reminder of Madrid's past. The "layers of DNA...city is as city does...you have to look for its way of expressing itself,

or repeating, echoing itself in places” (Cole). Madrid is an unforgettable city, with plenty of architectural art and history. In *A cultural history of Madrid* by Deborah L Parsons she states:

“volumes of practical, topographical information, historical chronicles, directories of street and public buildings, illustrated manuals, or descriptions of social life and events, all assumed familiarity with the city that promised to equip the reader with the knowledge necessary for traversing and understanding it” (Parsons 17).

Parsons is explaining how cities have become urban spectacles because of the superimposing of different events in time. She explains how all-encompassing accounts of its past and present landscape i.e. architecture provide a broader view on the city as a whole. Madrid’s elaborate architecture and eventual urban art is evidence of Madrid acting as a palimpsest.

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Andrea is a fourth year Political Science major and Professional Writing minor. She currently serves as the Director of Communications for the Associated Students of UC Merced, education chairman for Kappa Kappa Gamma, student curator at the UC Merced Art Gallery, Office of Student Life outreach intern, and logistics chairman for the Campus Activities Board. Andrea strives to serve in the Peace Corps where she hopes to tackle the most pressing needs of people around the world and work towards a sustainable level of change after attending grad school for Public Administrations and Human Resources.