

BEFORE THE GARDEN

An ethnographic approach to the relationship between the city and its river.

INTRODUCTION

Life flows through the current garden, paying no regard to the pulsing memories which surround it in a space that has evolved with the city since its very foundation.

The result of photographic and documentary archival research, this exhibition shows how the classical image of the river and its subsequent contemporary reconstruction as a garden hides a more diverse and complex reality.

The importance of the river and the walls as a visual reference of the city is evident in the fact that this is the main image of most of the engravings and postcards that began to circulate throughout the world at the end of the 17th century.

The value of these memories goes beyond simple nostalgia. Looking at the past teaches us that our surroundings are constantly changing, the result of the evolution of relationships between people and their environment.

Illuminating these processes contributes to strengthening the emotional roots that link us to the spaces that we inhabit, enjoy and are accustomed to perceiving as natural and familiar.

Valencia was not born with its back to the sea, as is often said, but deliberately facing its river.

1.LIVING ON THE RIVER

During the post-war years, Spain suffered a long decade of economic stagnation along with a significant displacement of the population from the countryside to the city. The harsh living conditions, unemployment, low wages and the lack of affordable housing, caused shanty towns and subsistence housing to emerge on the edges of the cities where land was less desirable.

Valencia, on the other hand, historically surrounded by highly productive agricultural land, made this type of settlement difficult. For this reason, together with the usefulness of a close proximity and access to water, some inhabitants and many newly arrivals found the riverbed to be, despite its inherent danger of flooding, an opportunity to establish themselves and follow their life pursuits.

PJO document

In this document, with the address of a student from the Young Workers Foundation (Patronato de la Juventud Obrera), we see the level of sophistication of the settlements, with numbered houses. These minimal everyday records show the existence of other ways of living in cities. Only seven months after the creation of this proposal, the settlements will fall victim to the great flood of 1949.

Flood of 1949

Official documents speak of the existence of 2,000 homes and some 8,000 inhabitants. The great flood of 1949 devastated the towns, causing numerous fatalities. Despite all this, it took another catastrophic event, the well-known flood of 1957, to convince the authorities of the risks associated with this type of settlement.

2.LIVING FROM THE RIVER

The use of the river water before entering the city to irrigate surrounding agricultural areas, together with the long periods without rain typical of the Mediterranean climate, generated the chronic drought that left the riverbed dry and facilitated the exploitation of its resources.

The riverbed was a source of gravel and sand to make the necessary mortar for construction. Nearby families used it for the cultivation of potatoes, sweet potatoes, onions, peas and other vegetables to complement their diet as well as using its water, essential for all kinds of domestic work. It was also a space for grazing and the livestock industry until the seventies.

At the same time, the riverbed is a meeting place for other trades related to water, such as the loggers who floated logs down the river from Chelva and Chulilla, the stonemasons from Godella for the construction of the walls, as well as the last mills that operated outside the city.

The jurisdiction of this space was in constant conflict between the Valencian City Council and the Júcar Confederation and these uses were tolerated. But the well-being of the riverbed was a constant concern. Some work obstructed the flow of water, causing health risks, while making floods much more dangerous.

Pollution

The river water was useful as a means of cooling for a variety of industries that settled near its mouth starting in 1940 such as the CAMPSA oil complex and the Unión Alcoholar Española. Permissiveness and scant legislation caused the riverbed to be used for waste disposal, transforming the mouth of the river into a landfill until the end of the 1970s.

Stadium

1) In 1922, the businessman Vicente Ferrer Peset began an ambitious leisure and sport facilities project aimed at the tourist industry. The plan included a running track, a stage for shows, a velodrome and a water park. Between 1923 and 1925 the stadium was also the headquarters of F.C Gimnástico (Gimnástico Football Club). In 1928 it was abandoned due to financial difficulties.

2) The remains of some controversial wooden privacy fences are still visible, and remind us of one of the first episodes of urban speculation related to sport.

3.LIVING THE RIVER

After two catastrophic floods (1949 and 1957) the Franco administration, motivated by its general and economic interest in development, decided to put an end to the problem once and for all. The solution would be a large urban infrastructure project with the objective of diverting the Turia River before its entering the city. The project known as "Plan Sur" (The South Plan) would not be completed until 1970.

During the sixties there was much public debate among experts about what to do with this land, the dry riverbed, inside the city. Should it become a highway, a railway network, a garden?

Meanwhile, the bed of the Turia River became a large, empty, urban lot increasingly used for leisure and sport activities; which reflected the lack of public infrastructure for these activities during the last years of the dictatorship. In 1973, as a result of citizen mobilization, the Valencian City Council transformed the old riverbed into a green area, taking the first steps towards the current Jardín del Turia.

Channeling

In 1955 the first measures were completed to restructure the riverbed and avoid future catastrophes without the need to divert the river itself. The flood of 1957 disrupted all plans. Later, the administration worked to limit the use of the riverbed. A central water channel was built and the surrounding soil was prepared to promote vegetation and enhance the aesthetic image of the city while the South Plan was being carried out.

Citizen mobilization

The commitment of the Valencian City Council of 1973 did not rule out urbanizing some parts of the riverbed. After Franco's death in 1975, the neighborhood associations continued with their protests and we want it tree green." Finally, in 1977 the city council declared the space a "total green area". The first democratic government of 1979 would begin the planning of the garden.

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_ Taller d'Història Local de Godella.
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