

# THE CHAPELS OF LABOUR UNIVERSITIES

RECOVERING MODERNITY IN THE SPANISH ARCHITECTURE OF THE 20TH CENTURY

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If we wish to understand the architecture of Labour Universities, we must first go through the social and political conditions which marked their planning and development, analysing the basic characteristics of the type of teaching done at those centres.

The Labour Universities project was born during Franco's regime, mainly promoted by Girón de Velasco, Minister of Labour and leader of Falange. It is funny that they took a progressive model as an architectural and institutional reference point: the *Université du Travail* in Charleroi (Belgium), which had been built in order to improve the technical skills of miners and workers in the province of Henao-Hainut. Among its teaching goals, there was a thorough training in every aspect: intellectual, technical, physical, social, moral, artistic and aesthetic, with the purpose of integrating workers effectively in society.

This technical teaching model moved on to France with the *Bordeaux Mutualities*, and it is from there where it could have extended its influence to Spain. The repercussions of the model would not end there, given that Labour Universities were created up to the 70s in various countries, such as Iran, Uruguay or Zaire. This proved their theoretical validity.

The creation of Spanish Labour Universities is first mentioned by Girón during a speech given in Seville on 25 November 1950. There he labelled the future centres as an ambitious project aimed at the professional, technical and human training of workers. Their beginning was marked by the principles of the National Trade Unions, together with those of the National Catholicism. This was the result of the ideological interests of the winning right wing.

The pragmatic needs requested by these centres needed an architectural response that was non-existent so far, and it was also difficult to achieve with the old methodologies. The kind of architecture that would provide the institution with its look became a hard issue in every aspect: dimension, scale, language, etc. Sacred spaces had to be present there, particularly in



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religious centres. (The Tarragona centre was secular, as well as every centre built from 1964 on, though some of them still kept a place for worship).

There are three main periods in the history of Labour Universities: the first one, between 1945 and 1959, when the Gijon, Seville, Cordoba, Tarragona and Zamora centres were built; the development period, between 1960 and 1964, with centres built in A Coruña, Alcalá de Henares, Cáceres, Zaragoza and Huesca; and the expansion one, between 1965 and 1975, when they started being called *Universidades Laborales*, and those in Eibar, Cheste, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Tenerife, Toledo, Málaga, Almería, Logroño, Albacete, Ourense and Vigo were built.

Although these centres were always promoted by the state, their educational management was initially assigned to the Church through various religious orders: the Jesuits in Gijon, the Dominicans in Cordoba and the Salesians in Seville and Zamora. The domestic services, such as kitchen, laundry or cleaning, were carried out by communities of nuns. This required the existence of a convent-type space inside the complex. The first attempts to provide Labour Universities with a proper formal and functional expression show a clear conflict between classicism and modernity. Luis Moya emerges as the anti-modern crusader whose proposals were materialised in an ideal city model, linked to the *Civitas Dei*, where the chapel becomes the central element articulating the whole complex.

The chapels planned by Moya for the centres in the starting period (Gijon and Zamora) entail a continuation of the space previously tried at Saint Augustine's church (Madrid, 1945). This combined the central and basilica plans, as well as the classical principles with the material construction laws<sup>1</sup>. The Labour Universities chapels show Saint Augustine's typological development taken to the limit in spatial and constructive terms. As opposed to the Madrid case, this is understood as part of a greater complex, as an essential element of the ideal city proposed.

The Gijon chapel (1946) (Fig. 16.1) appears as a tabernacle of a city that is already sacred in itself, as the volume standing out at the main square of the complex. It reminds us of the ideal cities shown on Renaissance canvases. The plastics of the chapel is reinforced by means of the prospect tower marking out the sacred nature of the University, providing it with a symbolic character and becoming, together with the chapel lantern, milestones along the ceremonial approach to the centre (Fig. 16.2).



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In the case of Zamora (1947), the chapel is displaced from the centre to a corner of the square, thus delimiting the atrium that gives access to the University (Fig. 16.3). Once again, it appears as the object fulfilling the role of visual and structural protagonist<sup>2</sup>: the church is the element which characterises the look of the complex, helping to articulate the different parts (Fig. 16.4).

Luis Moya had already presented a first solution to the architectural problem of Labour Universities and to their inner sacred space. This solution, following Antoine Compagnon's definition, may be considered as anti-modern. According to Compagnon, antimodern people are those people who were forced to be modern against their will:

Antimodern people are modern people in trouble with modern times, modernism or modernity, or the people who were reluctantly modern, displaced modern people or even untimely modern people<sup>3</sup>.

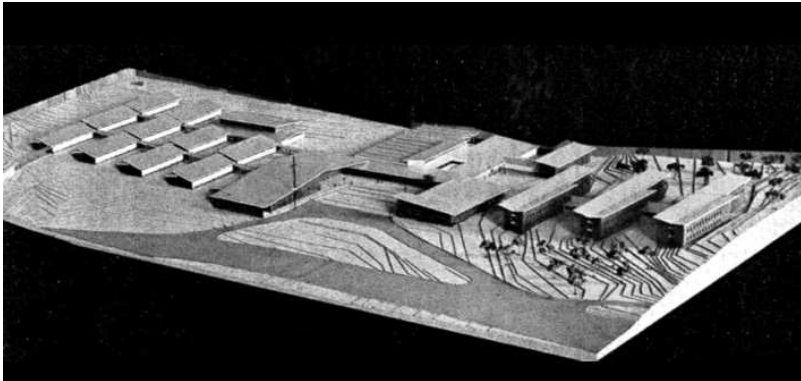
Antimodern people are also and simultaneously modern, still and forever modern, or maybe modern in their spite.

As pointed out by Antón Capitel, Luis Moya was searching for some sort of third way between academicism and modernity. An antimodern stance between both confronted trends of the whole 20th century; trends that he deemed to be similar and flawed in the same way, therefore, it was necessary to overcome them both<sup>4</sup>. His principles were relegated to temples where it was possible for him to materialise the antimodern architecture he defended.

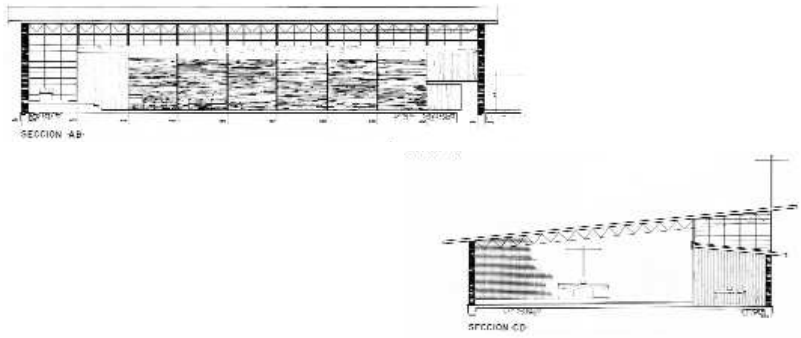
It was in the outskirts of A Coruña that it became possible to face once again the architectural solution of the specified program. It was also the first occasion on which a contest for draft projects of this type of centre was launched. The conditions of the contest (B.O.E. of 19 April 1960) express the importance of

the program's functional organic configuration, so that the various facilities in the centre should have the most adequate shape, dimensions and location, according to the role to be played by each of them<sup>5</sup>.

Following the Modern Movement principles, it is specified that the functional configuration



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will provide the complex with its own physiognomy, supported by the most appropriate technical and constructive media, thus defining the most characteristic aesthetic traits of the center<sup>6</sup>.

The need to take into account the then current status of the national industry was also alluded to, as well as the possibility of

a certain typology of the work units that need to be manufactured at important production centres<sup>7</sup>.

Architects Luis Laorga & José López Zanón (Fig. 16.5) came up with the winning proposal. The Modern Movement methodology was present in the accurate definition of functional areas, consisting of standardised cells, whether they were classrooms and workshops, in the case of the learning area, or dormitories in the case of the halls of residence. The classical institution gave rise to a new and modern one, characterised by the fact that the complex is divided into several semi-independent pieces. Each of the functions is expressed as such, and is then coordinated with the rest, integrating a group of buildings. The main goal was not achieving efficacy, but turning the building into a work of art by making it *meaningful*.

Meaning was then understood as something in relation to use, rather than to a symbolic shape. As a result, the solution consisted of a series of pieces, every one of them with its particular identity, and simultaneously inter-linked, in order to achieve a working whole. That was how the free plan was transferred from the dwelling scale to a semi-urban one, where several buildings related to each other and to their surroundings<sup>8</sup>.

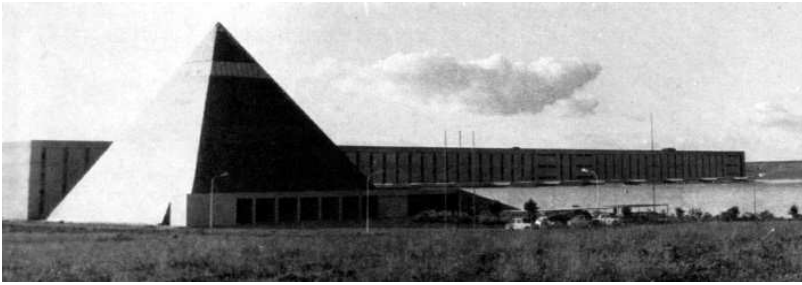
The chapel moves away from classicism due to its materials and to its language (Fig. 16.6); it ceases to possess the unique articulating look of the initial centres, becoming one more tooth in the gear of those *learning machines*. In A Coruña, the link among the three main and singular elements (the conference hall with a huge foyer, the dining hall and the chapel) and the ground secure the understanding between the building and its support as a whole, at the same time framing the urban scale of the building by means of the square they constitute (Fig. 16.7).

The square cannot be understood without considering its direct relation to the sea. This square, open to the sea, is a meeting and access point. In it, circulation is distributed by following a hypodamic network defin-

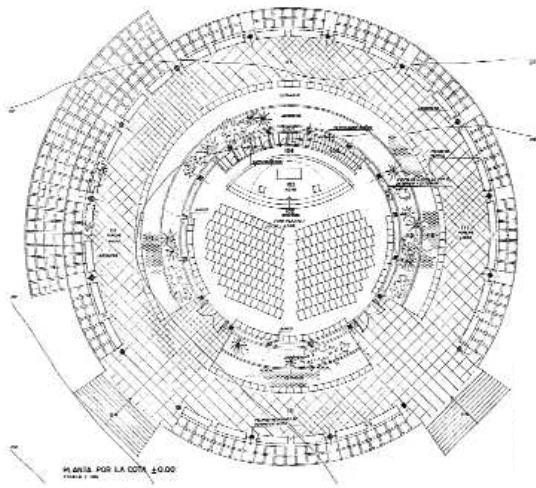
Fig. 16.5. Luis Laorga & José Lopez Zanón, A Coruña Labour University, 1964. Competition model.

Fig. 16.6. Sections of the chapel.

Fig. 16.7. Square leading with the chapel at the back.



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ing the growth patterns in a different way of understanding the building's urban scale.

In 1962, Laorga & Zanón won the contest for Madrid Labour University. Their project highlights even more the idea of a building understood as a modern city. According to the plan proposed, the chapel is just one more space within the functional configuration of the parts.

Although this centre was never built, the architects were assigned Huesca's Labour University project. There, the conference hall was the only symbolic element standing out of a new horizontal tapestry (Fig. 16.8). It is a huge pyramid recalling Luis Moya's pyramidal basilica project for his *Sueño arquitectónico para una exaltación nacional* (Architectural Dream for a National Exaltation, 1938). It is a game of volumes in the sunlight with clarity and functional simplicity, where we also find a recovery of some timeless elements in the history of architecture, such as the cave or the menhir.

This recovery and review of modernity will also take place in the Labour Universities built later on. Their small chapels will be accessory elements perfectly fitting with the complex, of which they will imitate the linguistic and building patterns. The examples of Cheste (1967), Almeria (1973) and Ourense (1974) show how the principles of the Modern Movement were developed and perfected by the introduction of factors such as the relation with the place, the monumentality or the vernacular.

The case study of Cheste is particularly illustrative. This is a secular Labour University projected by Fernando Moreno Barberá where we find a small oratory next to one of the paths linking the residence halls to the dining halls (Fig. 16.9). This place was planned for meditation and private piety, given that the usual liturgical celebrations were held in the 'aula magna' or in the open air. This circular temple is surrounded with a peristyle with columns, rising on a podium in the Bramante style. The original project reinforced this idea by making it rise out of a pond (Fig. 16.10). A jalousie with rectangular pieces is located on the cover, allowing control of the light inlet. The care with which every element defining space was designed teaches us about the meaning of modernity and its relation to history. Classical has nothing to do with setting up columns or not, said Luis Moya some time ago.

Fig. 16.8. Luis Laorga & José Lopez Zanón, Huesca Labour University, 1967.

Fig. 16.9-16.10. Fernando Moreno Barberá, chapel of the Cheste Labour University (Valencia), 1967.

The architectural evolution of these centres entails a passage from a reactionary stance towards modernity, where the *agora* was the characteristic social stage of the institution. That was the place where men became citizens and the temple played a main role in the definition and articulation of that space. Later on, that space was fragmented and spread out due to functional zoning; the *agora* as social space becomes void, the public space is pulverised and the democratic institution is diluted. Then the temple remained an accessory element, though its small scale allowed an experimentation with the achievements made in the recovery of modernity.

### NOTES

1 Cf. Javier García-Gutiérrez Mosteiro & Antonio González-Capitel Martínez, *Luis Moya Blanco Arquitecto 1904-1990* (Madrid: Electa, 2000), 110.

2 Cf. Antonio González-Capitel Martínez, *La arquitectura de Luis Moya Blanco* (Madrid: Colegio Oficial de Arquitectos de Madrid, 1982), 179.

3 Antoine Compagnon, *Los antimodernos* (Barcelona: Acontilado, 2007), 11.

4 Cf. García-Gutiérrez & González-Capitel, *Luis Moya Blanco*, 73.

5 BOE, April 19, 1960: 5124.

6 Quoted.

7 Quoted.

8 Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Los principios de la arquitectura moderna* (Barcelona: Reverté, 2005), 144.