

# Orientalism and Architecture in the Spanish Exposition Pavilions, 1873 – 1929

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Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, architecture played an essential political role in the debate about the national identity of Spain. The question of which architectural style best represented the nation's "being" was subject to intense controversies, which greatly influenced the shaping of Spain's architectural historiography.<sup>1</sup> Similar events took place in France, England and Germany, but Spain's particularity stemmed from the problem of how to confront, how to "nationalise" the highly important legacy of the Moorish architecture.

From the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the romantic generation in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Spain and its culture faced this problem with a wide range of attitudes (from rejection through partial appreciation to enthusiastic acceptance), resulting, already in the context of the new orientalist paradigm, in the acknowledgement of a specific historiographic site for Moorish architecture, which was definitely incorporated in Spanish architectural history with José Caveda's (1848) book.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, the essential contributions to the vision of Islamic architecture in Spain by numerous Western travellers, writers and artists (Washington Irving, Victor Hugo, David Roberts, Richard Ford, John Frederick Lewis, Chateaubriand, Gautier, Girault de Prangey, Doré...), who forged an orientalist view that saw the Islamic past in emotional terms and within the framework of an ahistorical poetics of dreaminess, are not to be neglected. It is this conjunction of historiographic architecture and orientalist thinking that results in the inclusion of neo-Arabic architecture in the modern metropolis,<sup>3</sup> manifesting itself in a broad typological

spectrum, including manor houses and mansions, interior spaces in which the oriental voluptuousness adapts to new forms of comfort or leisure, restaurants or cafés, facilities of mass entertainment, bullfight arenas, kiosks, public lavatories, etc. In this process, universal exhibitions constitute a privileged place of encounter between historiography, orientalist aes-



Fig. 2  
Hippolyte Dernaz, *L'Andalousie au temps des Maures* in the Exposition Universelle in Paris 1900.

thetics, architecture and political debate. In the tense coexistence of these factors, the official Spanish exposition pavilions displayed, from 1867 on, an oscillation closely bound to the country's political vicissitudes, between the glorification of the Arab, the evocation of the Renaissance (with the "Plateresque" style), the Gothic civilisation, the hybridisation represented by the Mudéjar style and the combination of various styles.<sup>4</sup>

Even though in the Great Exhibition of London in 1851, the Islamic Spain was

evoked by Owen Jones in the Crystal Palace's polychromy and in the Alhambra Court de Sydenham,<sup>5</sup> the system of representation based on national pavilions was established in Paris in 1867. Then, Spain opted for the neo-Plateresque building by A. de la Gándara, in whose interior Alhambresque reproductions by Rafael Contreras were exhibited. However, in Vienna in 1873, there already was a shift towards the Islamic, with Lorenzo Alvarez Capra's neo-Mudéjar pavilion and the neo-Arabic wine cellar by the González of Jerez.

Nevertheless, it was in 1878, again in Paris, where the so-called "explosion of the Alhambrismo" took place with Agustín Ortiz de Villajos's pavilion. After a debate as to whether the Renaissance or the Arab style was more appropriate as "national character", the building that was eventually constructed on the *rue des Nations* displayed a kind of Arabic eclecticism, mixing elements of the Alhambra, the Mosque of Cordoba and other Moorish buildings in an orientalist anti-historical aggregation (Fig 1).

In 1889, when the *rue de l'Histoire de l'Habitation Humaine* and the *Rue du Caire* exemplified a new architectural orientalism based on the reconstruction of "local colour", Arturo Mélida y Alinari's Spanish pavilion juxtaposed neo-Plateresque, neo-Arabic and neo-Mudéjar elements in a failed attempt at offering a historical overview of Spanish architecture. Then, in 1900, once again in Paris, the contrast between the official neo-Plateresque Spanish pavilion and the delirious *avant-la-lettre* theme park by Hippolyte Dernaz, which lead the orientalist image of Muslim Spain to a paroxysm with its *Andalousie au temps des maures*, was registered (Fig 2).

For Brussels in 1910 – the same year the first great exhibition of Islamic art took place in Munich<sup>6</sup> – it was again decided to focus on the revival of the Moorish past. The pavilion by Modesto Cendoya, curator of the Alhambra, included a reasonably accurate reproduction of the Patio de los Leones,<sup>7</sup> except with a smaller num-

ber of arches. In this very year, Cendoya constructed the Hotel Alhambra Palace in Granada, which offered its stunning pseudo-Islamic architecture to the increasing tourist consumption.

In this Granada, indulged in its orientalist image, Leopoldo Torres Balbás, who was named architect-curator of the Alhambra in 1923, started to propose a new model of scientific restoration different from the orientalist delusions, with a re-thinking of the concept of “tradition” and his defence of an architecture based on genuine folk tradition (the same that Federico García Lorca defended at the time),<sup>8</sup> mainly expressed through constructive lessons and the fair use of materials instead of ornamental refinement.

Since his arrival at the Alhambra, Torres Balbás had started to be passionately interested in Moorish architecture, which before then did not appear among his priorities.<sup>9</sup> His enormous restorative work in the Alhambra was accompanied by a number of scientific publications about Moorish architecture, culminating in 1949 in the great synthesis *Arte almohade, arte nazarí, arte mudéjar*. It is precisely in this dual role of legacy and historical investigation that the Hispano-Arabic architecture abandoned the realm of 19<sup>th</sup>-century orientalism.

Granada designed a great Hispano-African exhibition for 1924, which eventually did not take place. Torres Balbás as well as the Arabist Emilio García Gómez were members of this failed endeavour’s committee, and, if the event had taken place, it undoubtedly would have constituted the first embodiment of that new and modern vision of the Islamic legacy. However, it was not until 1929 in the “Exposición Iberoamericana de Sevilla”,<sup>10</sup> where Torres Balbas’s Granada pavilion marked the unequivocal commitment to an evocation of the Arabic architecture rid of ornamental excesses and more legible in terms of volumes, composition and spaces. In 1952, a group of Spanish architects gathered in the Alhambra in order to try to foster the use of modern architecture in Spain and the main text resul-

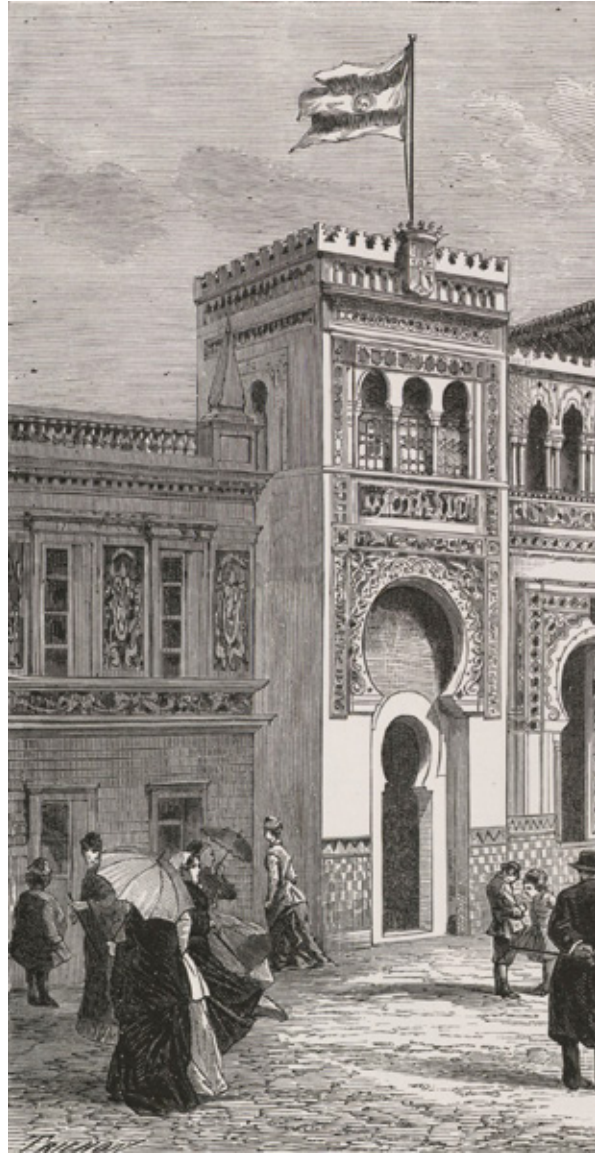
ting from this meeting, the *Manifiesto de la Alhambra* (1953), definitely consecrated this new image of Moorish architecture as the language of composition and construction, capable of providing arguments even for contemporary architecture.

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Fig. 1  
Agustín Ortiz de Villajos, Spanish Pavilion in the  
Exposition Universelle in Paris 1878.

<sup>1)</sup> Calatrava 2011a.

<sup>2)</sup> Caveda 1848.

<sup>3)</sup> Labrusse 2007; Oulebsir/  
Volait 2009; Calatrava/Zucconi  
2012; Giese/Varela Braga 2016.

<sup>4)</sup> Bueno Fidel 1987; Çelik 1992;  
Lasheras Peña 2009.

<sup>5)</sup> Flores 2006; Calatrava 2011b.  
Alhambra Court, Jones 1854  
(Jones 2010).

<sup>6)</sup> Meisterwerke mohammeda-  
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<sup>7)</sup> Rodríguez Domingo 1997:  
132.

<sup>8)</sup> Calatrava 2002: 29-36.

<sup>9)</sup> Calatrava 2007: 40-50;

<sup>10)</sup> Barea Ferrer 1987: 131-162.