

# SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION AND URBAN IMAGE OF «LA CORREDERA» (CORDOBA. SPAIN) SQUARE THROUGHOUT HISTORY

**Antonio López Ontiveros and José Naranjo Ramírez**

Departamento de Geografía y Ciencias del Territorio. Universidad de Córdoba

Underlying the popular naming of the «La Corredera Square» there is a quite meaningful urban reality, since «La Corredera» is Cordoba's Great Square, with all the meanings and connotations this reality entails for Spanish and Spanish-American urbanism.

Both in its most ancient origin as well as its subsequent evolution, «La Corredera» of Cordoba is part of the urban renewal movement started by the Spanish monarchy with the Catholic Monarchs, and it will reach its peak during the reigns of Philip II and Charles V.

But we will focus our attention on these basic topics (origin, evolution, original urban functions, etc...) just at the beginning of our work, in an epigraph which is intended to be a starting point and main grounds of what is, in fact, our main goal: with the aim of defining the urban image of the Square, to make inquires and to reveal the perception that has been transmitted from this Square from literature (either local, general or written by travelers who had visited Cordoba over the centuries); and depending on these results, a second goal arises: revealing to what extent the Square has developed the role of the symbolic representation of the city itself.

For the achieving of these goals, the development of this work starts with the already mentioned introductory epigraph, in which we carry out a brief and quick geographical and historical tour over «La Corredera Square». Included in this analysis are topics such as its possible Roman origins, its evolution during the Muslim period and, of course, the definitive adding of the Christian period, from the first stage, after the Reconquest, up to the final fulfilment of a real «Great Square» at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This first part of the work ends with a reference to the most relevant urban functions that the Square had during this period.

A second stage of our analysis of Cordoba's «La Corredera» deals with the process of conversion from an irregularly shaped urban space –and, at the same time, somehow chaotic and disorganized in its activities and functions– to a really great and geometrically regular square, a kind of theater hall and peculiar stage, also a preferential place for the

hosting of important acts and public solemnity celebrations. This process is depicted in the literary texts of Vélez de Guevara included in «El Diablo Cojuelo» (1641), Cosme de Médicis (1688), the traveler Jouvin (end of 18<sup>th</sup> century), and the literary contributions – with historical connotations– of Ricardo Molina and some other important scholars such as Ramírez de Arellano; being all of these, obviously, clarified and contrasted with the thoughts and commentaries of modern urbanity scholars who dealt with the topic.

With the arrival of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, during the first years the importance of «La Corredera» is not reduced, keeping its symbolic value and the monumental character of the Square. However, with the passing of time, it is shown that the symbolic image of «La Corredera» during that century starts its decline, something that can be extrapolated from the analysis of texts devoted to this urban space by the travelers Lantier, Peyron and Swinburne, the writer Leandro Fernández de Moratín and, by inverted deduction, from the silence about the Square kept by the most relevant Spanish traveler, who was so careful and detailed in the descriptions of the things which called his attention and were of his interest: Antonio Ponz.

This process continues during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a moment in which the analysis of «La Corredera» becomes particularly complex. On the one side the weakening of its symbolic image is still present, progressively advancing towards the conversion into a peripheral urban space, as can be inferred from the texts that several travels –foreigners and some Spaniards– left us. That is the case, for instance, of R. Ford and Mellado, being the most expressive example the contribution of Byrne (1866), a wonder of negativity and rejection towards everything contained and entailed by the Great Square of Cordoba; from the comparison with Madrid's (from which the Cordobesian monument is left in a bad way) to the sinister and poor environment given, in Byrne's opinion, by its function as a marketplace, these are factors which allow him to conclude that the Square «was undoubtedly the most disadvantaged area of the old city and it did not detain us any more, once we got to know its revolting peculiarities». Similar feelings are given in the texts of Begin, Scott (who gives the Square and the city «the honour» of being «probably the most embarrassing place in Andalusia»), Blackburn, Davillier, etc.

In contrast with this image of worsening and poverty, Cordobesian authors from the 19<sup>th</sup> century give the Square a high symbolic and historical meaning; the enthusiastic exaltation of this space, very much in keeping with the romantic historicism, take them to ignore the decadence and marginalization of the Square and its surroundings, which are hidden and disguised in a positively marked costumbrism.

A leading role in this tendency was Luis M<sup>a</sup> Ramírez y de las Casas-Deza, scholar and historian who, in his texts (mainly «El Indicador cordobés») and an article published in the «Seminario Pintoresco Español»), offers a historical summary, an architectural description and a laudatory judgment of «La Corredera». To sum up, the opinion of «La Corredera» by Ramírez de las Casas-Deza is very high and forceful: «superb square» and «a square that can be undoubtedly being among the best of Spain».

Meanwhile, T. Ramírez de Arellano, author of «Paseos por Córdoba», left us the best and most complete view of «La Corredera»; his texts are the most important and complete among all the existing with some historical value, with an essential agreement with the most recent researching results. From a geographical perspective he offers an accurate adaptation of «La Corredera» in its urban context (St. Peter neighbourhood) and, in this context, he wisely and

meticulously deals with the urban functions of the Square, having been counted up to thirteen different functions, spread in his texts.

The fact that the Industrial Revolution had its first setting in «La Corredera» just makes things even more complex. The first steam machine is installed in the Square, in a hat factory located in the noble building that was prison and mayor's residence. This process of «modernization» of the Square will lead to another shocking peculiarity: the installation of a Central Market Place in the vast central area, an impressive structure made of stone, cast iron and concrete which arises at the end of the century and that, in spite of reinforcing the business function, will fully change the appearance of the once baroque Great Square of Cordoba.

To sum up, travelers and writers who come to Cordoba are little interested by the Square, which is seen as a marginal and diminished reality, finally transformed into a marketplace, first outdoors, lately in several indoor spaces, and culminating with the introduction of a massive iron and concrete structure in the Square. The impact of these activities and the consistent degradation –boost by the progressive separation from the new urban downtown– is what travelers get, who can not understand other historical, economical and social values, not to mention the aspects related with costumbrism which are so much appreciated by Cordobesian scholars.

The analysis of the situation in «La Corredera» at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is fulfilled by means of two groups of outstanding texts: the texts written by the journalist Ricardo de Montis and the ones that can be get from Pío Baroja's novel «La feria de los discretos» and that use the Square and its surroundings as the main setting.

Ricardo de Montis depicts a retrospective and nostalgic view of «La Corredera» in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Montis gives, as a basic urbanistic key of the Square, its central location, since in its surroundings were located, according to Montis, the main businesses, craftsmen and the general economic life of the city. All was boosted, according to Montis, for being a point of «meeting of the popular classes in Sundays and other festivities», as well as the place for «great receptions and shows...» As a summary, it must be highlighted the romantic and nostalgic mood of Montis, who emphasizes the picturesqueness of «La Corredera», reinforcing costumbrism and the personalities who met and did business there, an image which is mainly based in a historicism which provokes a great feeling of nostalgia.

Pío Baroja, in his novel, transforms Cordoba –and specially the surroundings of «La Corredera»– in the settings for the adventures of the protagonist, Quintín, a character who suffers melodramatic adventures which, set in the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, contribute however with an urban, economic and social depiction of Cordoba in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, period in which Baroja knew the city. Without judging the literary value of the novel, some of the ideas developed by Baroja related to «La Corredera» are tremendously useful: a) it is a place with a glorious past, but now it is ugly and dirty; b) there is an extraordinary valuable and detailed description of the outdoors Market in the Square; c) description of the traditional market in the city towards the description of the activities in the neighboring streets; d) even considering that Baroja presents «La Corredera» as the downtown of the city in its novel, the plot allows us to see also the progressive migration towards a new social and symbolic heart of the city («Las Tendillas»), a downtown which moves away from «La Corredera», with all the derived increasing marginality in the Square.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century continues with the decadent line we already know, creating two different lines in literature: a) on the one hand, remembrances of the glorious past of that space, with revivals of the activities and most notorious moments of the Square; b) on the other hand, to praise the architectural and aesthetic qualities of «La Corredera». Both lines were followed in an especially brilliant way by Ricardo Molina, poet belonging to the Grupo Cántico, to whom some other authors, closer to contemporary years, joined, and being all of them studied in this work.

But probably the most important fact of this century is that, in 1956, after the period of assignment of Central Market (built, as has been said, in the middle of the old Great Square), the city hall recovered the control over the building and pulled it down. This will mean to give back to this urban space the status of square it had lost. From this moment onwards, topics which can be found about «La Corredera» are: a) formal interventions in the Square, especially in the **façades**; b) the trading function is kept, but in a very peculiar way: two conventional markets (one of them in the underground) and an outdoors extremely busy street market (which also invades the arcades); c) rebirth of a new costumbrism which turns around inns, taverns and other businesses; d) continuation and worsening of the process of buildings' wear, which leads to the marginalize of this urban space.

In 1981, under this situation, a key fact takes place: the declaration of the Square as Historical-Artistic Monument (R.D. 3551/1981), which means, at the same time, the beginning and implementation of the **«Special Plan of Protection and Improvement of La Corredera Square»**. The process of recovery starting at this point will mean a considerable change with results, in some aspects, really outstanding. This work ends up with the analysis of this process, of its architectural, social and economic results, as well as with a list of literary references which dealt with these facts, expressing also some reflections and questions to be answered sooner or later.