

URBAN LANDSCAPE STUDIES  
EUPHORIGENIC LANDSCAPES

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**LAREG**



VALENCIA  
39° 28'N 0° 23'W

SIZE	134.65 KM <sup>2</sup>
POPULATION	809,267
DENSITY	6,000/KM <sup>2</sup>
ELEVATION	15 M
TIME ZONE	CET/CEST (UTC+1/2)

## VALENCIA – LEARNING FROM LA VEGA

Daniel Czechowski

October 13th, 1957. That day Valencia suffered from torrential rainfall. The level of the River Turia that flowed peacefully the previous day rose threateningly until it flooded the entire city centre. Nearly hundred people were killed in the floods and Valencia experienced the worst flooding in its history. The next day, streets and entire neighbourhoods were under water and residents wading through knee-deep, muddy water in lonely streets. As the river had previously overflowed its banks several times, the discussion cropped up again of diverting the river to the south of Valencia, in order to avoid finally the city centre's flooding. After ten years of construction, the relocation of the River Turia was carried out in 1973 and the river was directed into a wide concrete corset on the southern outskirts. Initial plans had envisaged the use of the former river bed as a free-way, but a citizens' movement fought for a green river bed. In October 1981, the Catalan architect Ricardo Bofill received the order for the master plan of a new large park in the former riverbed. Leaning today over a railing of a bridge which once spanned the river, one sees

palm trees, flower beds, cyclists and joggers. Stretching over about twelve kilometres and lying four meters below, the Turia Park [Jardín del Turia] crosses Valencia from west to east like a green ribbon.

## SHAPED BY WATER – THE NATURAL MORPHOLOGIES

The relocation of the river was one of the major interventions in the urban fabric, whose surroundings were for a long time mainly influenced by dynamics of the river. Due to erosion and sedimentation the coastline was carried farther and farther out. These processes were only restricted when the first irrigation channels were created and the river could no longer flow freely. The constant changes in the shoreline by depositing and flooding have prevented the emergence of a natural harbour. Valencia is therefore an example of a large Mediterranean city which does not develop out of a port site. The area between harbour and town, about six kilometres, remained for a long time in agricultural use.

Furthermore the morphology is dominated by the major geological structures of the Iberian Peninsula, which is located in an active geological boundary zone between northwest Africa and western Europe. Spain is dominated by two mountain ranges up to 3,000 me-

ters high. The Pyrenean-Basque-Cantabrian Mountains in the north and the Betic Cordillera in the south, reaching up to Valencia. As the mountain ranges usually reach out into the sea, there are few extensive coastal plains in the area of river mouths. Valencia is located in one of these plains, bordering the Mediterranean Sea in the east. In the west, north and south, the semi-circular vast plain of the River Turia is bounded by hills and mountain ranges. They protect the plain against strong winds and cold spells. These thermal advantages enable an agricultural production of two to three crops per year on the same plot. However, the precarious water availability, especially in summer, requires intensive irrigation. The water comes from the River Turia. The entire environment of Valencia, known as Huerta or Vega de Valencia, has been irrigated for centuries by the river through an elaborate irrigation system. The intensive irrigation leads to salinization because the evaporating water leaves the dissolved salts in the soil. By impairment and decline in plant cover, wind and water are continuously removing fertile soil. The cultural landscape shaped by centuries-old farming techniques (terracing, irrigation, etc.) expires and erosion progresses. In the district of Valencia alone, almost half of the land is affected by erosion. The ru-

ral migration intensifies these processes and can lead to further desertification.

Another dominant element of the natural morphology is a lagoon. L'Albufera is situated 16 km south of Valencia, a freshwater lagoon separated from the sea by a strip of sand dunes and pine forests. It has developed over the time between the rivers Turia and Júcar which flow into the sea 30 kilometres apart. The sediments from the mountains, deposited by the two rivers at the coastal area, formed a narrow separation with the help of ocean currents. Canals and reed beds crisscross the area, for centuries rice has been cultivated in the swampy banks of the lagoon.

Water is the central element of the natural morphologies. In its various guises, water has shaped the landscape of Valencia.

#### DEPENDENT FROM WATER — THE EVERYDAY LIFE

Valencia has always had a special, if not ambivalent relationship to the water. There were times when the sea for the Valencians meant a lot, the natural access to economy, politics, culture. Later, the sea lost its importance, and only the land and agriculture remained. More than 1000 years ago, its inhabitants created a system of irrigation canals that are still used today. The Huertas, the

fertile, extensive arable fields and vegetable gardens, separate Valencia from its port. Another reason why Valencia has unlike Barcelona no direct sight to the sea. For a long time, Valencia considered itself a town on the river, and showed no particular interest in the sea, an indifference that is reflected in mild and windless days of January, when the sea is calm and smooth during the so called Calmas de enero. Recently, Valencia turned its focus towards the sea: To host the 32nd America's Cup, a new port was built and plans for further urban development along the coast were created.

Valencians are descendants of traders and farmers, which gave the city a rural-provincial character. The foundation for Valencia's livelihood and early prosperity were the Huertas, which explains some of Valencia's most distinctive features.<sup>1</sup>

The country life was arduous and always dominated by water. The vegetable farmers in the Huerta would depend on the allocation from the irrigation canals, while fishermen and rice farmers on the lagoon were dependent of changing water levels and often lived "like an amphibian in a land of reeds and mud when man from childhood on buries itself in a barge, these eternal coffin, without which one can not move".

"Ceaseless returning people were punting tiny black boats - the horses of these farmers - with which every member of the aquatic tribe from an early age knew how to use. It was indispensable to the work in the fields, for a visit to the neighbour, for the recovery of the daily bread."<sup>2</sup>

The superposition of many cultures, especially Roman, Moorish, Catalan, and Castilian, allowed the Valencians to keep their traditional values, but also be open to new ideas, which is reflected in the many churches of different architects<sup>3</sup>. There is little pomp architecture, Valencia's buildings tend to show that they are useful. Valencia's old town has largely retained the Moorish character which is visible with a dense and irregular street grid, many small squares and markets. If you get lost in the old town, it is said, then ask someone who shows you the way to the river. The former river bed of the Turia, which meanders around the old town, has become a kind of reference point within the city. After the devastating floods a park emerged with orange trees, tennis courts and soccer fields. Whether the new park in the old river bed can replace the lost qualities and meanings of an urban river, is questionable. In any case, the park has become an integral part of everyday life.

Today, especially compared to Madrid and Barcelona, Valencia wants to be bigger, more important and attractive. It wants to be seen as a third competitor in a contest that so far was dominated by two instead of three cities. But Valencians are accustomed to this imbalance, and as part of their everyday identity, they bear it with a mixture of bravery, injured pride, and resignation. Valencia has never been very good at celebrating the own as valuable, but at the best defended it against competition. For example, the own language, Valenciano, is much less present compared to Catalan in Barcelona.<sup>4</sup> In the search for identity and self-affirmation, Valencia looks to other cities and not so much on its own specificity.

It began to view at Barcelona and Madrid after the Reconquista<sup>5</sup> of the city by the Christians and the end of the Moorish rule. With the concentration of economic relations to Catalonia rather than to Andalusia, the geographical orientation of Valencia also changed from south to north.<sup>6</sup> The following expansion of connections to Barcelona and Madrid finally embedded the city into national systems with the opening of a new, shorter rail line to Madrid in 1948 – which made Valencia's port the nearest to the capital.

## EMANCIPATED FROM WATER – THE GLOBAL AND AUTONOMOUS SYSTEMS

Not only the infrastructure systems of the motorway and rail networks led to spatial variations, but especially the integration into the international systems of agriculture. Competitive situations and marketing problems led to a loss of value of traditional agricultural products and a decline in agricultural land. The continuous balance between urban development and the development of the agricultural plain has been interrupted since then. Urban development has since been perceptible only at the level of systems. It began with the relocation of the River Turia about 40 years ago. A part of the natural morphology was destroyed and a system created elsewhere that technically solved the flooding problem, but could not replace the lost qualities of a river at the outskirts. The new channel cut a wide artificial path into the plain that ignores the fine structures of the surrounding countryside and forms a sharp divide between the city and the Huerta, which did not exist before. What reinforces this effect, are highways running on both sides of the channel. Has Valencia ever discussed to keep the river in the old town and build a kind of bypass instead that can temporarily be flooded at high tide, and otherwise serve as a use-

ful element of the cultural landscape? No. Instead Valencia focused on larger projects: Between 1991 and 2006, the City of Arts and Sciences [Ciudad de las Artes y de las Ciencias] was built by the architect Santiago Calatrava, an ensemble of white, biomorphic buildings with concert and opera house, 3D cinema and a planetarium, a science museum and an aquarium. Like prehistoric skeletons the buildings rise abruptly from the river plain at the end of the Jardines del Turia. The staircases and platforms along the buildings are closed, though they are meant to be available as public space for all Valencians. Locals rarely get lost here. The clean, futuristic image is more suitable for marketing events from car companies. The linear pools of the City of Arts and Sciences are always held in an accurate condition. They only serve to mirror the architecture, but show no relation to the river or in general to the history of water. The only relation between the everyday and cultural landscape is created by a small mobile shop selling horchata, a popular drink made from tiger nut, which comes from the nearby Huerta and is normally offered in special cafes [Horchatería] in the city. The City of Arts and Sciences was created out of a political will to put a magnificent landmark. Its contribution to public life is doubtful; it remains but a

city within the city.

Furthermore, two of the biggest and most expensive sporting events in the world came to the city. Valencia was host to the 2007 America's Cup, the most famous sailing regatta, which was held back in Europe for the first time after the original race off the Isle of Wight in the UK. The America's Cup was taken as an opportunity to start the reconstruction of the port. The international star architect David Chipperfield was charged with designing the main administrative building pavilion Vele e Vents (Sails and Winds) as a widely visible sign.

Since 2008, Valencia organises a street circuit for Formula 1 Grand Prix races. The European Grand Prix is held at the newly built racetrack at the port. With approximately 320 km/h the 5.4 kilometer circuit is traversed in about 1:37 minutes. A speed synonymous with the rapid development of Valencia. As another new system the Formula 1 course represents a fragment between the city and the sea in the area of the mouth of the old river Turia.

There are many cities full of contradictions and contrasts, but rarely the intersections are as visible as in Valencia. A narrow coastal strip with a port, the City of Arts and Sciences, the old city, the suburbs are fragments of the urban landscape of Valencia. These fragments,

whether installed systems or historically evolved elements, provide no connection either to the natural morphology nor the everyday worlds. This can only be reached by a linking texture that brings together city and country in the plain.

#### EMERGED FROM WATER – THE FABRIC OF THE CITY AND THE PALIMPSEST OF THE LANDSCAPE

The basic structure of the cultural landscape is formed by an irrigation system, fed from the River Turia, that Moorish settlers created more than 1000 years in the plain of Valencia [Vega de Valencia]. This fertile, irrigated plain consists of a variety of vegetable gardens and orange groves. Seven main channels distribute the water in a wide range of ditches that run through the plain like a net. An eighth channel is used for irrigation of urban gardens and flushes the wastewater out of the city. The Water Court [Tribunal de las aguas] determines and depends primarily on the distribution of the river water abstracted. There is no parent - royal or governmental - institution, but a separate instance of the “irrigators”.

The eight judges are farmers who are democratically elected by farmers and who judge farmers. Everyone has a right of water, but no one can call it his own, the community decides on

the distribution of water. Thus, everyone is part of the whole. Besides the canals and ditches, the appearance of the Huertas is characterised by a particular architecture. Water mills along the canals were often the starting points of new settlements. The Alquerias distributed in the whole plain were mostly enclosed gardens and villas of the rich farmers and wealthy classes. The huts [baracas] represent the typical dwelling of the small-scale farmers in the irrigated areas. The simple design of air-dried mud bricks, pointed gables and thatched roofs is completely adapted to the landscape of reeds and mud [cañas y barro]. In the course of centuries, the Huerta has always been changing. Initially farmers got rich with onions, later they grew tomatoes, eggplants and melons.

Today, there are primarily grown tiger nuts or oranges. The variety of agricultural uses and agricultural practices led to a diverse landscape. The Huerta formed an order of irrigation canals, roads and plots, linked buildings, open spaces and landscape, and combined living and working.

Since the 1960s, agriculture is displaced primarily by industrial and urban sprawl. In addition to the on-going building process, infrastructure development leads to fragmentation in the



plain. Especially for the small farms, the cultivation is hardly worth. The farmers migrate to the cities to earn money, so that today many of the Huertas lie fallow. Many farmers have sold their land so it can be built on. Today, the channels and ditches often run for miles beneath houses and streets. Many of the channels decay, get dirty, and the water quality is getting worse, so that the entire irrigation system is increasingly ineffective.

In the sum, all these factors lead slowly to the disappearance of agricultural land in the plain.

The development of Valencia has always been closely linked to the development of the Huerta. The boundaries of the city in terms of the municipal administration as well as the influence of land use and irrigation corresponded to the spatial limitation of the Huerta. A decision for the city was always a decision for the cultural landscape.

The commitment and enthusiasm in dealing with the drained riverbed and its restoration to a substantial part of the urban fabric has not been shown in the use of the systems. Where on the one hand Valencia was open to new ideas, it has missed on the other hand to reinterpretate traditions, in order to use the cultural landscape fabric for the further development of the city.

The daily identity cannot be satisfied in an accumulation of systems. With the rejection of the “arduous life”, the life with water, the everyday life separated from the cultural landscape. The basic elements of the landscape in the plain were no longer part of the urban development: Gardens and irrigation canals were destroyed, the river was sealed off and the lagoon “frozen” as a natural reserve.

#### THE CONFLATING PLAIN

It is time that Valencia accepts its identity as a *city of water* and thus as a *city in the plain*, and neither as a *city of the sea* nor as a *city of the river*. This is only possible if the supporting element of water in all its forms will again play a role in Valencia’s everyday life. One opportunity is the land reclamation which once built the basis of Valencia’s existence and growth. This cannot be achieved by young hipsters growing vegetables on roof gardens, but as a true urban agriculture based on a structure of canals and orchards as part of the urban fabric. The key is always a combination of water and the urban fabric with shorelines, riverside walks, paths, and accesses as public spaces.

The plain provides the best conditions: a coherent structure, which brings together the major forms of the natural

morphologies, the city and the settlements. The principles of the Huerta: the network, diversely used open spaces, and especially the common element of water and its public waterfronts can form the basis of a connecting, permeable fabric of Valencia's urban landscape.

*“A view, the extent of which does not permit a detailed examination but which altogether presents a mixture of settlements and cultivated lands, of houses and villages rising in the middle of a verdant carpet. The town of Valencia is seen at the end of this plain; all the habitations which surround it seem as if they were part of it and we imagine that we see the largest town in the world.”<sup>7</sup>*

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ingendaay, P. (2007) Ackern und feiern, Merian, Valencia und die Costa Blanca, Nr. 05/2007 (in German)

<sup>2</sup> Vicente Blasco Ibanez (1867-1928) describes in his novels “Reeds and Mud” [Cañas y barro] and “The Hut” [La Baracca] the arduous life of farmers and fishermen in the lagoon and the Huerta near Valencia

<sup>3</sup> Dieterich, A. (1970). Überschwärmende Phantasie, Merian, Valencia. Costa Blanca, Nr. 07/1970 (in German)

<sup>4</sup> Ceballos Betancur, K. (2007). Die Cupstadt, [http://www.zeit.de/2007/17/Die\\_Cupstadt](http://www.zeit.de/2007/17/Die_Cupstadt) (in German)

<sup>5</sup> Recapturing, a centuries-long period in the Middle Ages in which several Christian kingdoms succeeded in reconquering the Iberian Peninsula from the Islamic kingdoms

<sup>6</sup> Houston, J.M. (1949) Urban Geography of Valencia, The Regional Development of a Huerta City.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander de Laborde, A view of Spain, 1809, in: Houston, J.M. (1949) Urban Geography of Valencia, The Regional Development of a Huerta City.