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Review: Juan Caramuel y la probable arquitectura

Juan Caramuel y la probable arquitectura by Jorge Fernández-Santos Ortiz-Iribas

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Persian Gulf basin and its urban growth, yet a number of the book's contributors seem to underestimate it.

Although some chapters lack critical approaches to the study of this loaded region, *Architecture and Globalisation in the Persian Gulf Region* is well edited and richly illustrated with both color and black-and-white drawings and photographs, including aerial photos of the cities discussed. A bibliography would have complemented the collection by providing avenues for further research in this important area. Further, it must be noted that, with only a few exceptions, the essays remain silent on the horrendous human rights violations in the region. Despite these concerns, *Architecture and Globalisation in the Persian Gulf Region* is a major contribution to the study of the Persian Gulf region and its architecture, providing much-needed instructional materials in these areas of inquiry.

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Jorge Fernández-Santos Ortiz-Iribas

Juan Caramuel y la probable arquitectura

Madrid: Centro de Estudios Europa Hispánica, 2014, 591 pp., 114 color illus. €33.66, ISBN 9788415245353

This is a remarkable book on a remarkable individual and his work. In character with its subject, it is also erudite and ambitious, written by a scholar who has searched many archives and libraries and obviously has read widely in various languages and on many topics as he followed the travels and thoughts of Juan Caramuel y Lobkowitz (Madrid, 1606–Vigevano, Lombardy, 1682). Caramuel, who wrote books on subjects ranging from theology to mathematics, typography, and linguistics, is best known, especially among architectural historians, for his three volumes of *Architectura civil, recta y obliqua* (a fourth volume was never published and is lost), the focus of this publication. However, Caramuel and this treatise probably have not been understood so well in our times as they are in this volume.

Caramuel was a Spanish subject at a time when that could signify many identities. His own identities had their origins in his having been born in Madrid, the son of

a royal guard from Luxembourg at the court of Philip II and a Bohemian mother who was born in Antwerp. He studied at the Jesuit Colegio Real in Madrid and then at the University of Alcalá. Before he reached the age of twenty, his religious vocation took him to the Cistercian monastery of Santa María de la Santa Espina at Castromonte (Valladolid) and to other monasteries in Castile. Always in the Spanish Habsburg sphere, he subsequently traveled to Flanders, the Palatinate, and Prague, then to Rome and the Spanish kingdom of Naples, and finally to Lombardy. Fernández-Santos examines all of these movements in detail because he believes that they are key for understanding Caramuel, and especially the *Architectura civil*, published in Vigevano in 1678 by a printer Caramuel himself, as bishop, had established there. Fernández-Santos's insistence on biography is well founded, since he establishes that although Caramuel did not publish the treatise until the end of his life, he had been keenly interested in architecture since his youth in Spain. It is also a fruitful approach because Caramuel's thinking and writing about the topic began in Spain and developed as his life unfolded. Indeed, one of the fascinations of this study is following the author as he carefully traces Caramuel's progress from one architectural and cultural context to the next, relating the friar's experiences to the development of his ideas, particularly as they can be detected in the *Architectura*.

An early and basic architectural learning site for Caramuel was that of Spanish traditional architecture, in which he studied and admired the work of experienced stonecutters. They were skillful at vaulting irregular spaces and at erecting oblique archways in order to provide views into certain areas of a building, as Caramuel saw in the church at the monastery of the Santa Espina where he entered the religious life and at the Escorial. It is significant that this architectural tradition has medieval roots and is not grounded in the classical orders. Caramuel's familiarity with this pre-Renaissance architecture gave him the freedom to accept and welcome new forms.

The Escorial, especially, is of pivotal importance for Caramuel's ideas, since it was at the center of an important discussion

about the Temple of Solomon in Spanish culture of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Fernández-Santos skillfully integrates this dense discussion into his understanding of Caramuel's ideas on the nature of Solomon's Temple as well as his philosophical positions. At the very real risk of losing the complexity and depth of the arguments deployed by Fernández-Santos, Caramuel's view can be summarized as a conviction that the Temple of Jerusalem was a concept, not a specific building that could be known as it once existed in reality. Thus, Caramuel did not accept the reconstruction of the Temple of Solomon proposed by the Jesuit Juan Bautista Villalpando. Rather, he focused on the temple as precedent for the Escorial insofar as it was, in the first place, the site for the worship of God by the king. The oblique doorways and vaults of especially the royal spaces of the Escorial, which made it possible for Philip II to see the sanctuary of the church from his bedroom, are crucial because they permitted the king to be always in the sight of God, present in the tabernacle. These ideas are related, in turn, to Caramuel's notions about columns. In his view, the twisted Solomonic column, being closer in its movement and decoration to the natural forms of trees and vines, corresponds to ancient biblical times. It symbolizes Christ himself, who was the redeemer promised in the book of Genesis. Fernández-Santos discusses how Caramuel related these ideas to a belief that the Jews who were in Spain in biblical times had accepted the teachings of Santiago (Saint James), thus becoming a part of the Catholic Church from its earliest days.

Another important episode in Caramuel's intellectual engagement with architecture involved his alleged negative opinion of Bernini's design for the space in front of St. Peter's in Rome, where the friar lived from 1655 to 1657. Fernández-Santos deals with this in detail in his discussion of Caramuel's notions of how architecture "is" and how architecture "seems" to the viewer. The friar believed that the architect must take the latter into account, using mathematical and geometrical ingenuity to distort elements in such a way that they might look correct. This is a principle of "oblique" architecture. Thus, Caramuel's criticism of Bernini's design would have centered on his belief that Bernini should

have taken advantage of the commission to explore such problems in designing the elliptical space, around which the columns should not all have been the same so that they might all look the same. This, of course, would have been against the “rules” of classical architecture as they were expounded by Vitruvius and his sixteenth-century followers.

Fernández-Santos discusses the discrepancies between the approaches of Caramuel and Bernini with care so as to be able to arrive at reasonable explanations of what the problems were and how they were perceived at the time. He presents Caramuel as a treatise writer who was able to distance himself from the antiquarian classicism that was generally advocated in Rome. Fernández-Santos also fleshes out the circumstances, reminding the reader that the particular case of Caramuel’s opinions on architecture in Rome was made even more complex by a disagreement between Pope Alexander VII and the friar that dated back to the Treaty of Westphalia. Caramuel had been in favor of accepting the treaty in order to establish peace, even though it granted authority over Roman Catholic subjects to Protestant princes, while Fabio Chigi, the future Alexander VII, was opposed. The religious and philosophical issue was Chigi’s disagreement with Caramuel’s probabilistic thinking.

In addition to presenting the genesis and content of Caramuel’s *Architectura*, Fernández-Santos is interested in how the work has been received over time, especially how Caramuel has been read and understood in Spanish architectural history. Indeed, he begins and ends his book with considerations of how Spanish historiography has dealt with the uneasy relationship between Spanish architecture and the classical tradition; he also addresses the importance of the amount of attention given to the Escorial and its aftermath. His last chapter, the title of which declares that it is about the “plasticity of form and the historicity of norm,” reflects on Caramuel’s willingness to go beyond classical and Renaissance treatises by speculating about earlier history and practices, as well as by visualizing other possibilities. Fernández-Santos himself follows suit by closing with the suggestion that this can provide lessons for the future.

One can barely do justice to this book in a few short paragraphs. Fernández-Santos offers many historical, cultural, philosophical, and practical observations regarding Caramuel’s work and the *Architectura* beyond the few mentioned here. Caramuel’s life was so full, and his mind so wide-ranging, that Fernández-Santos finds it necessary to repeat certain basic concepts to keep readers from losing their bearings. On the whole, however, there is also a sense in which the book leaves a great deal out. The focus is on only one of Caramuel’s books, so the discussion of the others remains necessarily in the background. The friar’s own architectural achievements—especially his masterful design for a new façade for his own cathedral at Vigevano, which integrated the building into a remodeled urban space—are presented, but they are not treated at length. This is not a criticism, but rather a confirmation of the importance of this book for bringing Caramuel and his *Architectura* to the attention of a contemporary audience.

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