

# THE MEMORY OF A DISAPPEARED ARCHITECTURAL TYPOLOGY OF THE POPULAR PERFORMANCE: THE CIRCUS-THEATRES IN SPAIN

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Theatre and circus do not need architecture to be produced, but throughout history specific spatial structures have been created for their better development. If Greece first and the Roman Empire later established the models of theatre, amphitheatre and hippodrome-stadium-circus that contained specific shows, they also witnessed the subversion of this architectural independence, because the rest of these buildings had to supply them when they were missing. This was the case in Colonia Clunia Sulpicia, one of the most important cities in northern Roman Hispania, where, lacking an amphitheatre, theatre combined its own activity with animal shows<sup>1</sup>.

Throughout history, both the degrees of adaptability of buildings conceived for a specific activity and the definition and fusion of architectural typologies have been exposing the intricate itinerary followed by the architecture. A path already enunciated by the American anthropologist Alfred Louis Kroeber with the analogy of the two trees, one referring to biological evolution and other to cultural evolution, whose difference lies in the permanent separation and the entanglement with union by “tissue-callus” of its branches, respectively.

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<sup>1</sup> Discovered in excavations carried out by Miguel Ángel de la Iglesia and Fransec Tuset, directors of the Colonia Clunia Sulpicia archaeological site.

In our opinion, this is the case of the so-called circus-theatres or theatres-circus that explored the intermediate possibilities in the field of architecture and entertainment, the meeting place between the types of man defined by Amiard-Chevrel (1983, p.11): the physical man of action and the psychological man of word.

In the Modern Age and on the periphery of art, the minor and popular forms of the spectacle (circus, fair theatre, variety shows, etc.) progressively acquired a new vitality, with the circus at the forefront. Its valued characteristics were the succession of shows with a different nature and without logical connection, the order motivated by internal needs that ignored the narrative practice linked to the text and the absence of illusionism or the free relationship with the spectators. In addition, these shows achieved a prestige, which they previously had not had, when were read in relation to the artistic expressions of oriental culture, which began to be widely disseminated in the Western world from the 19<sup>th</sup> century through universal exhibitions.

Both references had special relevance in the art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and were also wielded by the currents of theatrical renovation, whose mark was recorded in the architectural proposals and the shows of the avant-garde and post-avant-garde theatre. As for the type of shows, we can mention as examples the “theatre of attractions” by Eisenstein, Arvatov and Tretyakov, the unregulated theatrical practices of the counterculture of the 1960s or Grotowski’s paratheatre, among others.

With regard to buildings, the influence of the circus as a circular space in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was connected with the equality and reciprocity of the interaction between artist and spectator, reproducing the way the crowd spontaneously gathered around an event with a point of equidistant and centripetal view. Likewise, it had something to do with the interaction between spectators who were located in the perimeter stands around the circular ring. Given that the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the time of panoramas, it was also then when circular or polygonal buildings were dedicated to popular leisure such as circuses, whose spectators

were forced to take a centrifugal look that was translated by the cinematograph into the delocalized virtuality of the screen.

The architectural modernity reabsorbed the circus space in the Great Theatre in Berlin (1919) renovated by Hans Poelzig for the stage director Max Reinhardt, the Endless Theatre (1924) by Frederick Kiesler or the Total Theatre (1927) projected by Walter Gropius for the stage director Erwin Piscator. All these works exemplify this ancestry that later reappeared more as an organization of the spectators than as an architectural form, as in the Théâtre en Rond (1954) in Paris by André Villiers and Paquita Claude as well as the *Theatre in the Round* (1951) by Margo Jones, just to name a few examples.

The proper modern circus was born at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in England from the equestrian art parades (1678) organized by the excellent rider Philip Astley at his Halfpenny Hatch riding school in Lambeth, where he taught in the morning and performed these shows in the afternoon during the summer. In order that the horses could be better observed, they ran in a circle within a rough enclosure, without a roof and near the indoor arena for their training, which had not been inspired by any circular historical building. In addition, the demonstrations had to become a massive spectacle to sustain themselves economically as a business activity with the sale of tickets.

However, the circus was not truly produced as a show in solidarity with space until Astley put together equestrian demonstrations with acrobatics and pantomimes (1770) and he covered his Amphitheatre Riding House (1779) with a wood and cloth roof, located at the intersection of Stangate Street and Westminster Bridge Road. But, unfortunately, the Royal Circus, Equestrian and Philharmonic Academy (1782) of its close competitor Charles Hughes preceded the Royal Grove (1783) of Astley in defining the kind of permanently covered circus-theatres.

Therefore, the equivalent presence of shows of an equestrian nature and the additions induced the transition from the domain of the outdoor riding arena, sometimes with a stage, to a covered construction, equipped with a stage box

and preceded in front of the proscenium by a circus ring, a circular element that Astley incorporated despite he had not invented it. The success of his exhibitions in France allowed him to build several circus-theatres in Paris, starting with the *Nouvel Amphithéâtre* or *Amphithéâtre Anglais* (1783), located at 16 and 18 in the Rue du Faubourg-du-Temple inside urban block, which had similar replicas by other companies.

The varieties were included in the stage box, while the circus offered its performances in the circular ring already consolidated as a symbol, so that the particular needs of both types of shows were satisfied in the appropriate place, but not limited exclusively to them. The performances were developed in each space for the frontal and directional vision of stage box of Italian theatre and for the vision of the vertical dimension in the circus space.

The two performance spaces, the stage box and the circular track, were encompassed within a more or less conical roof or dome for stable circus-theatres or cloth tent for traveling circus-theatres, which are not the object of study in this communication. Both spaces were usually combined to be used together at the same time due to their origin, even if they could also serve only as a theatre or as a circus for certain events. In the case of being used as a theatre, spectators could be placed in the same circus ring as an audience.

Astley's exhibitions in France reinforced the Gallic circus tradition that had its splendor with permanent free-standing circuses. These were built in major cities with a constant programming, while in medium-sized ones it was more common to find circus-theatres. The influence of circus-theatres affected circuses, which assumed their heterogeneity, sometimes installing stages inside them to diversify their performances.

Hybridization characterized the circus-theatres that began to emerge in Europe at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which reached their golden age in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and disappeared at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Because of their strength and versatility, they competed with the stable European Italian theatres and plunged them into serious crisis, although eventually all of them

were colonized by the cinematograph.

In Spain, circus-theatres also proliferated all over its geography. Matabosch approached the first overall approximation, counting sixty buildings (Matabosch Giménez, 2009), but it is necessary to continue in this direction and investigate them in greater depth and breadth. This is one of the objectives of the research project *OEE CARTOTEA, Observatory of Scenic Spaces: Theater Cartography: Spain*, led by Antoni Ramón Graells, UPC - and developed by the first author of this paper.

In the first place, all projects and buildings have been located geographically in the national territory and by temporal layers. Those with the double denomination of theatre-circus or circus-theatre have been included, as well as those only named with one term despite accommodating both activities, getting a result of around a hundred items.

Only five examples of circus-theatres have survived nowadays. Among them, El Algar, Orihuela, Murcia and Santa Cruz de La Palma partially maintain their original use since they are dedicated solely to theatre. Just one, the Albacete circus-theatre, retains the capacity to host proscenium and circus ring shows.

Their respective restorations, undertaken between the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, have made it possible to deepen their knowledge. However, there is still much to be done to put them in relation to those that have disappeared or not built and value them as a whole as heritage of memory in their just measure.

Considering their origin as a popular spectacle in cities with a certain number of populations, Spanish circus-theatres were stable or permanent buildings, in some cases of seasonal use and changing location within the same city. Like their international contemporaries, they were theatres and circuses in unison, that is, multifunctional and typologically hybrid buildings. Most of them had a circular or polygonal circus space, but not exclusively, and were characterized by an irregular constructive quality.

For their research, a database has been developed with their characteristics and

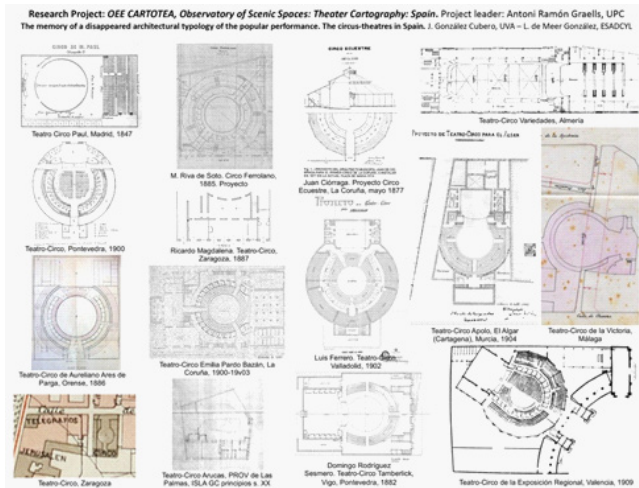


Figure 1. Circus-theatres in Spain. Plans. Authors' compilation

the existing graphic and photographic information that serves as a substrate for the comparative typological study in progress (Figure 1).

Previous research on the life of circus-theatres in Spain has been carried out fragmentarily and in an amateur way by lovers of the place who collected lived memories. Recently, academic research has resulted in a doctoral thesis (Tidor López, 2016), whose second chapter expands the inventory of circus-theatres and studies them in chronological-geographical order from a historiographic point of view. However, there is not yet a monographic and panoramic study dedicated to them (Figure 2).

As mentioned, it is also convenient to recover the memory of the disappeared or the unbuilt through their research, because they attest to a theatrical culture of past times and help to understand more deeply the typological renovation that occurred in modern theatre architecture on an international scale.

Other proposals and previous constructions are put in relation to the circus-

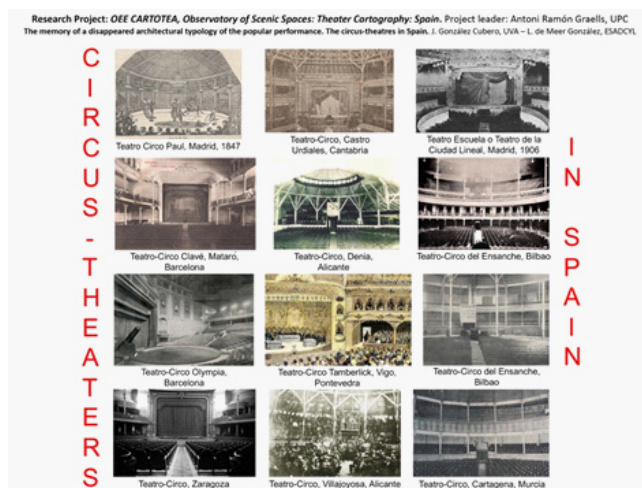


Figure 2. Circus-theatres in Spain. Interiors. Authors' compilation

theatres. From the high architectural culture, such as the circus projects of Étienne-Louis Boullée, to the national bullfighting tradition, such as the “plazas de toros” (bull rings).

The research has not forgotten to address the ramifications towards other shows that were carried out in circular and/or central constructions, like the “galleras” (coops) or “reñideros” (pits) for cockfighting<sup>2</sup>. Although small in size, they present certain constants that approximate them to circuses, in fact, this name is also used to designate them.

## Conclusions

The circus-theatres were temporary or permanent buildings, with an uneven constructive quality that were consolidated, at the same time as the panoramas,

<sup>2</sup> Currently, cockfighting is only allowed in Andalusia and the Canary Islands under strict conditions.

as constructions dedicated to leisure and popular para-theatrical shows. Whereas they were not an object of interest for high architectural culture, they had a great impact in popular culture, a fountain in which the Fine Arts drank and those others that advocated the renewal of the scene too.

The memory of the circus-theatres has been recovered by historiography, but it is still pending to be recovered by architecture in Spain. Although the vast majority of them have disappeared, they all constitute, together with the bourgeois Italian theatres, the heritage of the theatre life of cities, which has left its mark on urban areas in different ways. For this reason and because they were hybrid architectural examples, born purely from a functional necessity, it is essential to consider them not only as a legacy that occurred in parallel to the official theatrical architecture, reported by historiography, but as a fundamental part of it and of current performing arts.

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