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The 20th Century Restoration of the Alhambra Patio in Relation to Landscape Design

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Abstract

The Alhambra of Granada, Spain, is a palatine city and palace constructed by the Nasrid Dynasty (the last Moorish dynasty, 1230-1492) from the 13th century. Once it was self-contained, embedded on a hill between richly irrigated gardens and plantations. The restorer therefore required the combined knowledge of urban and landscape planning. Formerly the Alhambra was restored based on restorers' personal-restoration criteria. Leopold Torres Balbás (1888-1960), an architect responsible for the restoration in the early 20th century and a pioneer of "scientific restoration" in Spain, dealt with the greater part of restoration of the Alhambra in modern times. He considered the buildings' past alterations instead of focusing solely on authenticity. He intervened not only in the architectural space but also in the landscape space like gardens and other forms of greenery.

Torres Balbás researched gardens in Granada and Islamic spatial features, and intended to recover or make the individual character images of the patio. He used plants as a tool for intervention, especially cypress, and made it possible to distinguish between the original and restoration sections in modern times. To choose plants for completing a ruined patio was a new solution of scientific restoration in these patios in the Alhambra. This approach can be considered reasonable, as he did not destroy the ruins or reconstructed buildings whose original shape was unknown. By this he preserved its state. Also, he utilized plants not only for partition, but also for ornaments. He considered "durability of buildings", "archeological interest" and "artistic aspect" for the restoration works and applied it to his garden-design.

In previous research, there have been few references to his landscape views. This presentation attempts to present these aspects with his works and his related publications from 1923 to 1936 while he was working with the Alhambra. Also its aim is as well to clarify the connection between Torres Balbás' restoration and comprehension of landscape from the perspective of his works in the Alhambra's patios and his design theory, and suggests its effect on the Alhambra's recent design.

Keywords: *Leopold Torres Balbás; Alhambra; Garden restoration; Landscape*

Introduction

The Alhambra of Granada, Spain, is a palatine city and palace constructed by the Nasrid Dynasty (the last Moorish dynasty, 1230-1492) from the 13th century. The Alhambra is a complex of gardens and architectures of various ages, and after being ruled by the Catholic monarchy in 1492, many buildings still have remained intact. However, the structure of the pre-Reconquista state, especially the structure of the 13th century, is very difficult to identify due to many years of renovation and restoration, and the addition of components and decorations. The gardens made of organic substance and surrounding landscapes were damaged and changed faster than the

buildings, and their previous appearance almost disappeared. That is why the restoration work of the garden is more restricted than that of architecture.

The theme of “gardening” is important for the Alhambra, since many such gardens and patios exist (in this paper they are generally referred to as “gardens”). A patio is mainly a rectangular courtyard surrounded by buildings or corridors. Here, a closed garden space is called a “patio” and an open garden space is called a “garden”. Leopold Torres Balbás (1888-1960), a restorer or more strictly “architectural conservator (*arquitecto conservador*)” of the Alhambra in the early 20th century, was a pioneer of the “scientific restoration” in Spain. Most of the space-composition of the current Alhambra's gardens are attributed by Torres Balbás, and we can see a glimpse of his restoration. Also, he intervened not only in gardens and patios but also in the landscape spaces like cultivated areas or streets, so it could be assumed that he was working on restoration from a city-planning perspective. The Alhambra is a royal city built on a hill as a fortress and is a complex of various buildings. For that reason, the study of urban planning and landscape was essential for the Alhambra restorers, but in earlier research, there is little reference about the connection of Torres Balbás’ landscape views and his garden restoration.

In this paper, first, the features of the restoration of Torres Balbás are clarified from his description. Then, based on the research of J. Tito Rojo, research which is the nucleus of the investigations on the Alhambra's garden history, what kind of restoration theory Torres Balbás tried to apply to garden space and how it was actually restored will be considered using the examples of three patios. Furthermore, focusing on the fact that J. E. Chapapría, who has studied Torres Balbás in detail, divided his restoration period into multiple stages, a comparison of these findings with the aforementioned three examples is conducted. Also, from Torres Balbás’ records and works from 1923 to 1936, when he was engaged in the restoration works in the Alhambra, the changes of his landscape view can be seen comparing the stages of his restoration. In this way, by following his restoration stages and descriptions along the time series, the relationship between his landscape perspective and garden restoration that has not been much analyzed can now be explored.

1. The way to use plants

Torres Balbás intervened in more than 20 patios in the Alhambra.¹ In addition, he was also involved through research or restoration in cultivated areas and gardens, tree-lined roads, and cemeteries; his restored areas outside of buildings were extensive. Here we will first review Torres Balbás’ restoration criteria and analyze his restoration attitude in line with three steps that Tito Rojo defined. Tito Rojo showed how Torres Balbás defined in his works how to treat plants in the process of restoration.²

In describing his restoration criteria, Torres Balbás mentions the terms “eclecticism” and “elasticity” and states that he sets the following general criteria for the Alhambra; that is:

- (I) to respect, in the most absolute manner, the ancient work;
- (II) to avoid the additions as much as possible;
- (III) to make it possible to always distinguish the new addition from the old parts if it is judged that the addition is indispensable;
- (IV) the adjunct must not interfere in the artistic effect of the monument.³

And stated below,

Eclecticism and elasticity – this was our motto in the restoration works, always remaining faithful to the rigorous criterion of conservation, without losing sight of the solidity of the buildings, archaeological interest and their artistic aspects.⁴

The following points can be extracted by summarizing his restoration criteria from a large number of his writings:

- (a) to respect historical buildings and put effort into preservation without intervention as much as possible;
- (b) to reflect a unified structure from a distance but at the same time make it possible to distinguish new parts from old (the parts after restoration from before) from near by⁵;
- (c) to embrace a suitable attitude and method of intervention for the location and damage of the place, respecting the solidity of the buildings, archaeological interest and artistic aspects.⁶

Such a flexible or vague attitude also affects garden restoration. While referring to these criteria, in the following it is shown how Torres Balbás' treated the plants in the garden space.

(1) Plants as alternatives to buildings (Patio de Machuca)

The first method is to use a plant instead of a wall. The Patio de Machuca is located at the western end of the Nasrid Palace, a palace that has become the center of the Nasrid period. Torres Balbás' restoration works using plants on this patio can be broadly divided into two phases. The first was in about 1924, when two rows of cypress trees were planted in the center of the patio with flowers around them, and the second was a restoration that made partitions with cypresses in 1927.⁷ Among these, the second work will be focused on. Originally the Patio de Machuca was supposed to be surrounded by walls and two porticoes on both sides, but when Torres Balbás began to work, there was only one portico and one border wall. That is, in the first restoration, this patio was not yet in the form of a patio but an open space. The question was how to restore the lost walls and porticos here. He thought that it would return to a closed form and adopted a method of planting cypress like walls and a portico. In addition, as Topiary, he cut the cypresses to evoke a portico. The method of making partitions with cypresses has meaning in two ways. One is that people can identify the new and old of the restoration space. The other is not considered to be an imitation of the Nasrid period. Since there have been no cypresses in the Nasrid period, it is thought that he tried to prove that this restoration was not just a historical nostalgia but an invention of a new method. Since it did not add new constructions that would harm existing historic material, his use of plants is easily reversible and is an excellent way to maintain the building stock. In fact, in the second restoration, Torres Balbás replanted orange trees instead of the cypresses planted in 1924. In such a way, the use of plants as an architectural element was created. Torres Balbás had created a new solution in the restoration in Alhambra gardens.

(2) Plants as decoration (Jardines del Partal)

There are occasions when Torres Balbás used plants purely as a decoration too. For example, the Partal's garden was excavated by Torres Balbás' predecessor, Modest Cendoya (1907-1923), who found fountains and stairs but at the cost of destroying a row of poplars.⁸ The Partal is located at the eastern end of Nasrid Palace, and is a large area that includes a patio, chapel, and cemetery. In addition to the destruction by the predecessor, the remnants of such residences remained complicated, so that the way of restoration was limited. Eventually Torres Balbás fundamentally rebuilt the site, and designed the garden with the ancient structurals as if it were a flowerbed with cypresses, box fence, ivy pergola, cobblestone pavement, and so on. It can be said that it represents the difference between the new and the old in that it differs from the Nasrid era.

(3) "Restoring" of plants (Patio de los Leones, Figure)

Torres Balbás analyzed past documents and testimonies and also made restorations to remove the additions that did not clearly exist regionally and historically before, and restored them to their assumed past condition. It is noticeable in the Patio de los Leones. This is a royal private patio in the Nasrid Palace. Here he referred to the oldest and most convincing testimony. It was a 1502

description of Antonio de Lalaing, in which the patio was vegetated with six orange trees to block the sun.⁹ According to the testimony, Torres Balbás planted three orange trees in 1928.¹⁰ He did not explain about the meaning behind the number, but it may also have shown that it is not a reproduction or imitation of the past form. However, in summary, he brought out a new garden that was not in the past.

Torres Balbás' way of using plants from the above three points allows the assumption that he emphasized "durability of buildings, archaeological interest, and the artistic side" also in the gardens. Naturally, the direction to such restoration in general flows into garden restoration. It could be said that he was conscious of artistic aspects and archaeological interest in (1), artistic aspects in (2) and archaeological background in (3).



Figure: Patio de los Leones in the present day, 2014, photographed by the author

2. Restoration attitude

Chapapria is a researcher who closely followed Torres Balbás' life, and divides his attitude of restoration into three stages mainly along his restoration of buildings.¹¹ The first stage was from 1923, his official designation as an architectural curator, to 1925, the next from 1925 to 1931, and the last stage is from 1931 to 1936. Among them, it is considered that the important point 1925, the separation of the first and second stages. The first stage is about a two-year restoration of parts of the Alhambra that needed urgent intervention. This work was strictly in accordance with the plan of Ricardo Velázquez Bosco (1843-1923), a plan which provided the basis for the whole restoration plan of the Alhambra. The second is the term when he started working on his own idea. Since the second and third stages are divided according to the place of restoration and the scale of works, the focus of this paper is limited to the first stage and the second stage.

Bosco, a member of the San Fernando Academy, a professor of the School of Architecture of Madrid and a teacher in the architectural history of Torres Balbas, defended the monument's conservation position and publicly opposed Cendoya.¹² Cendoya is a restorer who has a 19th century attitude for restoration and employed it on the Alhambra for the recovery of the images of a past melancholic Alhambra palace. It was enthusiastically accepted in Spain at that time, but was finally rejected by the conservative tidal currents of France, the United Kingdom, and so on. Torres Balbás had replaced Bosco as the principal conservator and removed the "alhambra-likeness from the perspective of the 19th century". This Bosco-plan was compiled between 1915 and 1917, and "aimed only at the conservation of the ruins".¹³

Applying the previous Torres Balbás garden restoration examples to the stage of this architectural restoration, it turns out that it matches well to the separation of 1925: The partition of the Patio de Machuca in (1) is 1927, and the decoration in (2) in the Partal is mainly in the 1930s, the plant restoration in the Patio de los Leones in (3) is 1928. Moreover, many of those types of his restorations were made in the late 1920s and 1930s. However, the restoration of these three gardens was started before 1925, and plantations had already begun in the Patio de Machuca and the Jardines del Partal. Excavation works were mainly conducted in these gardens, whereas already in 1924 pavement had been installed in the Jardines del Partal.¹⁴ So, as far as the three gardens are concerned, it is assumed that the turning point of his application to plant restoration is in 1924, which is different from that of the building.

3. Landscape perspective

Although Torres Balbás put emphasis on restoration with vegetation, how he thought about the relation between surrounding environments or scenery and restoration has not been analyzed. In order to consider his view of landscape and urban planning, the important parts of his writing from 1923 to 1936, which refer to landscape, have been extracted and summarized: He emphasized many times the importance of continuous remodeling of the city, and of the relationship between people's lives and landscape or city and landscape.

At first, in a 1923 article,¹⁵ he mentions urban planning and the expansion of cities, and after 1925, his references to urban planning increased. For example, a paper in 1925 on the rebuilding of the Toledo bridge also mentioned urban growth, urban planning, and modern improvements to the city.¹⁶ Secondly, he also mentions people – their social life and their architectural expressions – and landscapes in texts on urban planning. In 1923, Torres Balbás described the national spirit and its relation to history, architecture and landscape. He also stated that the concepts of architects themselves would focus on landscapes,¹⁷ so he thought that buildings would blend into the environment and become landscape. In 1929, mentioning the Galician region as an example, Torres Balbás briefly discussed the beauty of the countryside, as well as the urban and natural aspects linked to the history of the countryside. Here, he also recommended the maintenance of monuments linked to life and art.¹⁸ In 1930, he investigated Spanish residential houses, and judged that architecture was developed in contact with nature¹⁹ without being separated from geographical conditions and human life.²⁰ Third, he used the word “nuclear” when considering urban planning, and the preservation of old cities and their monumental characteristics were described. In 1925 he mentioned that in Morocco, some modern cities spread out of the old wall but the old core parts are respected and preserved. He said that it is an act of “killing” if we abandon our ancient city as a museum. He emphasized the importance of spreading the city outside without breaking the old nucleus while responding to the current needs.²¹ Finally, Torres Balbás touched on the larger impacts of nature. In 1933, he mentioned Murcia, and described the influence of natural conditions such as terrain and weather on architecture.²² In 1932, he stated that in Castilla, because the natural climate was linked to the architectural style, architectural heritage was about to be lost, so there was a need for its preservation.²³

The Spanish word corresponding to landscape is “paisaje”, but Torres Balbás hardly used it except when mentioning a concrete landscape. He began using this word in 1923 and rarely touched it after 1933, but consistently referred to architectural aspects and materials from cultural and historical analyses. However, his conclusion is basically about urban planning and its monumental character, and the idea persisted that urbanization and modernization should be done for enhancing people's lives while preserving a monumental city. In addition, the word “monument” and “picturesque” have emerged well in pairs, reflecting the importance of artistic

and archeological aspects. He also mentioned the connection between the “national spirit” and architecture. Very simply speaking, it could be said that Torres Balbás thought the landscape is a kind of monumental city that encompassed peoples’ lives and national spirit from the features of that land.

It cannot be said clearly that his restoration attitude was different before and after 1924, but as described above, all the elements extracted from his description lead to his restoration criteria. In other words, his view of landscapes became a restoration scale, and it carried on into garden restoration.

Conclusion

Today, the landscape in the Alhambra occupies an important position, and the protection of its tourist resources and sustainable management are advocated as one of the priorities of the Alhambra Patronage.²⁴ This is because the landscape is a "monument" that represents the environment, culture and nature of that land, and it greatly affects collective memories and current citizen life. That is, for the Alhambra, the landscape itself is also a major element of its identity, which also represents the national spirit, as Torres Balbás put it. He was the first Alhambra restorer or architectural conservator that focused on that ideal and created an enormous work. He used the plants in the garden according to his restoration criteria and worked flexibly. And it is suspected that he started work on the vegetation since 1924, hence before restoring the buildings in the Alhambra according to his idea. This leads to the conclusion that he was aware at an early stage of the importance of landscape. He also thought that the buildings would blend into the environment and become part of the landscape. His writings suggest that history, city, nature, architecture, people’s lives, and national spirit are interconnected to produce a “monument”. For him, the “monument” is a whole city or a landscape itself and a heritage which has to be protected. Finally, Torres Balbás’ approach to preservation while interacting with the Alhambra’s open spaces and missing building parts by adding botanical elements, formed the modern image of the Alhambra, and thus resonates in contemporary approach as well.

Notes

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9. L. Torres Balbás, ‘El patio de los Leones’, *Arquitectura*, vol. 11, pp. 221-234, 1929, p. 224

10. L. Torres Balbás, 'Diario de obras en la Alhambra: 1927-1929', *Cuadernos de La Alhambra*, vol. 4, pp. 99-128, 1968, p. 114. It is possible, however, that other orange trees were planted before 1928.
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Sara Satoh received a PhD (Letters) from Osaka University, Japan. After working as a Specially Appointed Assistant Professor in the Cross-Boundary Innovation Program at Osaka University (2017-2018), she receives a Research Fellowship by the JSPS - Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, Tokyo University.

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