

8.01 A VUELTAS CON LA CASTELLANA

javier garcía-gutiérrez mosteiro

ON AN ON WITH LA CASTELLANA

Javier García-Gutiérrez Mosteiro

The Paseo de la Castellana, from the bridge in Juan Bravo Street to San Juan de la Cruz Street, is again having some work done. It is the third phase of a project that, without anyone knowing the reason for it, moves forwards unstoppable in this historical main artery of the city. The first phase, between Plaza de Colón and Ortega y Gasset, finished some years ago was amply rejected by associations and citizens groups. Those "improvement" works altered everything that was alterable in such a singular urban space: changing the original granite pavement with new pieces which had little connection with the original; dismantling -in a frenetic "diaper from top to bottom"- the zones with soil and removing the Ligustrum trees; eliminating the existent 'furniture' and the consequent -and ineffable- apparition of renovated 'furniture'; installing excessive lighting for such an atmosphere... And all that, without facing the real problems that la Castellana had -and still has- which are: maintaining and improving the vegetation, widening the small lateral pavements, recuperating the stretches taken over (unnecessarily) by traffic, establishing road crossings that free the pedestrians from the smelly ordeal that the underground passages are (it is still not possible to cross Plaza de Colón...),

withdrawing the presence of over-bearing advertisements (it is curious that the «chirimbolos» already constitute the invariable symbol of the modern Madrid, the only things that remain before and after the works: we have seen them erected, with impasse loneliness, in the middle of the great works in Nuevos Ministerios).

Seeing the criticisms about the result of this renovation, I think it was the then city councilor -Juan Antonio Gómez Angulo- who said, just before the local elections, that the council team had reconsidered it and the following phases of the project would not be done. But, of course, they thought about it again (only, however, because keeping the before and the after -on both sides of Ortega y Gasset Street- was a more than eloquent and rather uncomfortable parallel). The thing is that the machines came back again and started the second part that, -to tell the truth- incorporated some of the observations that had been made but, still blurred the layout of the avenue.

Now it is the turn of the third phase: we see again how the original stone slabs are broken up to be substituted by a renewed pavement (of granite, yes, but how?). In Madrid we have been witnesses, time and again, to the fact that the renovation of urban spaces is limited to the change of

pavement, and this is, not always for the better. What has happened to the much-trumpeted 'Operación Gran Vía'? Why has the excellent stone pavement, near the church of the Salesas, been changed by another one which does not stand comparison? What is happening to the pavements of Madrid? All of this without knowing what plans are behind it or who is in charge. A quick look discovers more occurrences than planning.

We can see it clearly in la Castellana. The City Council of Madrid has just judged an important contest for the renovation of the crossroads at Prado-Recoletos, in which there has been no skimping on resources for its better development, and different institutions have been invited -among them the Colegio de Arquitectos- to be part of the jury. This contest defined an ample zone of works, which generously went from the southern side of the axis (the trident of Atocha, ronda de Valencia, Embajadores, Ciudad de Barcelona, Paseo de Reina Cristina...) which suddenly comes to a halt at the plaza de Colón: What is the reason for this difference in treatment from Colón onwards? It is good, and worthy of praise- that the City Council understands this spiral column of Madrid as necessarily connected with the structure of the southern part of the city. But, would not this continuity also be desirable in the northern part? Why

is it that for the stretch «Prado-Recoletos» a special plan is judged as necessary whose drafting comes out of a pompous contest, while the «Castellana» stretch, curiously, is given such a degrading and different understanding? Has it something to do with -we ask- the sharing of different city council departments? The city does not understand such taxonomies: the sequence Prado-Recoletos-Castellana, magnifies in its span making history, it does not admit such different positions in relation to acting on the urban design. It does not make sense that from Colón downwards they try to legitimize a work by Álvaro Siza and that from Colón upwards, with strict simultaneity, the urban ambit is being transformed without knowing what project, what hand, or idea guides the operation.

The historical axis of la Castellana -at least, that!- should escape from improvisations which, too frequently, characterize the transformation of the urban landscape in Madrid. (While I write this, I learn that the plaza de Colón, specifically included in the area of work of the mentioned contest, is being redesigned now: without waiting for the winning group, headed by Siza, to present its brilliant Special Plan -in which they have to propose, supposedly, what to do with it...).

