

CATCH THE SKY

About the Universidad Laboral de Almeria building

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I have been asked to write about the building of the Universidad Laboral de Almería that Julio Cano Lasso, together with Miguel Martín Escanciano and Antonio Más Guindal, built in Almería in 1976, more than 30 years ago, on land next to the Almería Airport.

I can only emphasize that the whole operation was the result of the extreme generosity of Julio Cano Lasso. It is not normal for a master of his stature to call upon a group of young architects, almost recently graduated from the School, to collaborate with him, signing and charging him.

He had previously invited me to collaborate with him in three Vocational Training Centers located in Vitoria, Pamplona and Salamanca. It was an unforgettable experience that resulted in three buildings of which one can still be proud today. We made a very restrained and very functional architecture of great sobriety, in which we created spaces of great beauty. We tried to comply punctually with those Vitruvian principles of Utilitas, Firmitas and Venustas.

The spatial solution for this project in Almeria was very clear from the very beginning. The location, on an esplanade by the sea, but without views over it, suggested, with the climate of Almeria, a kashba solution ordered by a rational scheme. In order to organize a complex educational program, a system of streets leading to a central square was established. This network of corridors links classrooms, laboratories and offices with various courtyards, through which they are illuminated and ventilated, creating a highly efficient honeycombed organism, typologically proven in this climate (like the Chanca neighborhood of Almeria). In some spaces the points of light are accentuated with deep skylights that, appearing on the roof, offer a singular image.

It was always thought that the courtyards, with the climate thus controlled, would become fertile gardens of native species. Vignonias, bougainvilleas, jasmines and vines were to grow there, making possible the indoor-outdoor continuity in the life of the building.

On the outside, the organism appears very closed, as if defending itself from external agents. The construction is of great simplicity, with an orthogonal grid of 4 x 4m, on a clearly rational scheme that allows unlimited growth.

The adventure of the construction of the Universidad Laboral de Almería was wonderful. I still remember the weekly site visits where Miguel Martín Escanciano and I would get off the plane dressed in an impeccable beige Tergal suit from Cortefiel, with a white cuffed shirt with cufflinks and tie, and very proud, we would go around the site giving orders left and right. Then we tried to go to the beach with our mandatory meybas, and then to the Hotel Costacabana to rest. And to eat at La Luisa or at Rincón de Juan Pedro, both of which, each in their own way, were magnificent. And if we had to spend the night, we did so at the Hostal Indalo in the city itself, which was quite economical. When many years later I returned to make the Plaza de la Catedral, everything had changed a lot.

And even more so when I recently built, with Modesto Sanchez Morales, Francisco Salvador and José María García, the office building of the Provincial Health Delegation on the Paseo.

The works of the Universidad Laboral were carried out, and very well, by Huarte as a construction company. Emilio Casal Piga was the exceptional Chief of Works, and the delegate José Luis Jiménez, a nephew of Doctor Jiménez Díaz. Carlos Pérez acted as quantity surveyor. Antonio Ayerbe, from Navarre, was in charge of the works, assisted efficiently by Julián Bello. The gardening, important, was done by Jardines del Mediterráneo, with Gonzalo Cirujeda. The walls, all of them, were whitewashed with a suitable mixture of lime and glue. The floors, all of them, were paved with clinker, the same pavement that we had already used with very good results in the Professional Training Centers.

We also take great care with the furnishings. From some armchairs that we designed with Julio Cano Lasso to some Danish armchairs that we bought in Mobisa from Morcuende. And some other singular pieces from the always attentive Pedro Pascual from MYC Gavina. The skylights were from LOP and the translucent panels from Cricursa. It seems incredible how memory can bring up so many names with such precision!

What about works of art? At that time there was a section in the corresponding law that indicated a percentage that should be used in public buildings for works of art. With that excuse, and with the advice of Gustavo Torner, a great friend of Julio Cano Lasso, we placed a large number of wonderful pieces. From Gustavo Torner's own sculpture at the entrance of the building, to works by Fernando Zóbel or Gerardo Rueda or José Guerrero. In short, all the artists of the circle of the Museum of Contemporary Art of Cuenca. A luck and a gift. In addition, we made a large model of the building that, in the Aaltian way, was placed in the lobby under the skylight on the back wall, which was invaded by climbing plants that I imagine that today will have almost covered it. It was a real delight to work with them all.

The assignment was made from the then Ministry of Labor with Licinio de la Fuente as Minister. The General Director was Efrén Borrajo Dacruz, Professor of Labor Law, with an unforgettable José María Dilla as Deputy General Director. All of them of enormous human quality. And how can we forget Mariano Norte, the alma mater of that adventure, assisted by Alfredo Casillas. All of them unforgettable people.

We made some wonderful models that have been widely reproduced. And after finishing the works, Carlos Pérez-Siquier, a master of photography from Almería, made some extraordinary black and white reports that were completed with some good aerial photos of Paisajes Españoles (Spanish Landscapes). And with magnificent slides by Julio Cano Lasso and Gustavo Torner.

It was published in numerous magazines, although the publication in A+U was the one that gave the building the widest dissemination.

In short, that sober, simple, austere architecture, with white walls, was like an attempt to catch the sky. Catching the sky, that's nothing!