

Reconstructing the disappeared 'heart' of Madrid: the convent of San Felipe El Real as urban setting for political, commercial and cultural life during Modern Age

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Abstract

San Felipe El Real convent was one of the most important epicenters of the political and cultural life in Madrid from its founding in 1544 until its demolition in 1841. Located at the 'heart' of the city, San Felipe had not only the church and convent, but also adjacent spaces such as the bleachers and the so-called 'covachuelas' (small shops attached to the church walls) that turned this architectural complex into an open space for the city. This paper aims to reconstruct this disappeared 'heart' of Madrid through documentary, textual and iconographic sources from 1598 until 1718.

Keywords

San Felipe El Real, Madrid, urban tissue.

Introduction

Gil González Dávila's *Teatro de las Grandezas de la Villa de Madrid* (1623) chronicle emphasized that San Felipe El Real convent in Madrid was «the very first and Primate of all the Holy buildings in the city. It is at the very heart of the *Villa*, and for this it is the most frequented» [González Dávila 1623, 243]. The relevance that San Felipe acquired between the 16th and 18th centuries was not as much due to the artistic treasures that it guarded inside or to the monastic life that developed within the walls of the convent, but to the adjacent spaces and its immediate urban environment. Two factors were key to enhance these spaces. First, its strategic location in Madrid's framework. The convent, founded by King Philip II of Spain in 1544, was placed next to the *Puerta del Sol* at the crossroads of the political axis of the city, which along the *Calle Mayor* led to the Royal Palace, and the *Plaza Mayor* commercial axis (fig. 1).

Second, San Felipe convent became one of the most visited places in Madrid because of its particular architectural morphology, which not only had the church, the convent and the cloister, but also a series of adjacent spaces that made it a monastic building open to the city: two large bleachers around the main and the lateral façade of the church, as well as a variable number of small shops attached to its walls – known as *covachuelas* or small caves – that the monks rented to merchants and booksellers. This way, San Felipe's commercial area, attracted all sorts of people, and became the most famous 'mentidero' in Madrid, that is, it was «the place where idle people meet for conversation», where fables and lies were usually told [Diccionario de Autoridades 1734, 545]. It is not surprising that the best writers of the Spanish Golden Age, such as Lope de Vega, Miguel de Cervantes or Francisco de Quevedo often visited this 'mentidero' and dedicated some of its verses to it.



1: Detail of the political axis in Madrid which linked Puerta de Alcalá door (indicated in green), Puerta del Sol, Calle Mayor street, San Felipe El Real convent (indicated in orange) and the Royal Palace (indicated in yellow), in Pedro Teixeira (1656). *Topographia de la Villa de Madrid*, Antwerp, Cura et solisitudine Ioannis et Iacobi van Veerle.

Unfortunately, San Felipe convent and its surroundings were completely demolished in 1841, and today there is no trace of what it represented in Madrid's urban palimpsest for almost three centuries. This paper aims to reconstruct the disappeared 'heart' of Madrid, focusing on the reconstruction of the vibrant and changing political, commercial and cultural activity that developed in San Felipe's close urban environment, especially its bleachers and *covachuelas*, whilst getting aside the history of the monastery and its architectural complex, which have already been studied elsewhere [Amador de los Ríos 1862, 431-432, Mediavilla, 1988, Mediavilla 2007]. Thus, some significant fragments of Madrid's 'heart' urban history will be recovered through the study of different kinds of documentary, textual and visual sources, such as historical and celebrative accounts or the convent's *Consultation Books*.

1. San Felipe El Real as urban scenography of power

San Felipe El Real convent and, especially, its bleachers where a significant enclave on the *via triumphalis* in Madrid. Since in 1561 Philip II decreed that Madrid was the permanent capital of the Kingdoms of the Spanish Monarchy, the city underwent successive urban changes in order to project an image of magnificence that corresponded to the seat of power of a king whose domains extended on both sides of the Atlantic [Alvar Ezquerro 2000]. Thus, the city, its streets and buildings should reflect the ideal of the royal majesty, which must not be only limited to the Royal Palace, known as the *Alcázar*.

Accordingly, an urban ceremonial route was established for those illustrious personalities who came to the *Villa* and Court. This political axis linked the *Puerta de Alcalá* city door with the *Alcázar* and had as outstanding intermediate stages the *Carrera de San Jerónimo* street, the *Puerta del Sol* place, the *Calle Mayor* street and San Felipe's bleachers, among others. Many ephemeral decorations and triumphal arches, conceived for each celebrative occasion, were displayed at these points.

Particularly interesting in this regard are the ephemeral decorations that were placed in the city on the occasion of the arrival at the Court of two queens: Margaret of Austria, Philip III's wife, who came in Madrid in 1599 and Mariana of Austria, Philip IV's second wife, who arrived in the capital in 1649. On both events the chronicles give detailed account of each triumphal entry. It is interesting to analyze here the scenography that was located in San Felipe's bleachers.

The entry of Margaret of Austria in Madrid took place on October 24, 1599. The Queen's route began at the *Puerta de Alcalá* towards the *Carrera de San Jerónimo*, where two triumphal arches were displayed. Then, it continued through the *Puerta del Sol* and the *Calle Mayor*. At San Felipe's bleachers a grandiose architectural and sculptural ephemeral decoration was arranged: the main marble sculpture of the group represented an 8-metre-high Allegory of Spain, wearing a sallet, while holding a spear with one hand, and the Royal Arms of Spain, with the other hand. Several figures representing the King's several kingdoms were placed on each side of this main sculpture: Castile and Leon, Aragon-Portugal, Navarre, Granada, Toledo, Valencia, Galicia, Seville, Cordoba, Murcia and Jaén [Tovar Martín 1988, 401].

Fifty years later, Queen Mariana of Austria, Philip IV's second wife, made her triumphal entry into Madrid and followed a similar route to her predecessor. For such an event, the city was again adorned with splendid ephemeral decorations. Four magnificent triumphal arches were arranged, each one representing one of the four parts of world, which were associated, in turn, with one of the four elements: at the so-called *Prado*, a representation of Europe was associated with the Air; at *Carrera de San Jerónimo*, Asia linked to the Earth; Africa and the Fire were represented at *Puerta del Sol*, and, finally, next to the Church of Santa María – in front of the *Alcázar* – America and Water were represented. In addition to these four triumphal arches, other grandiose decorations were erected along the Queen's ceremonial route, among which it is worth highlighting the architectural and sculptural group located at San Felipe's bleachers devoted to the Genealogy of the Kings of Castile and the Emperors of Germany. As described in an account of the celebration, the decoration consisted of a Doric architecture portico, made up of 44 lapis lazuli columns; the portico's dimensions were approximately over 50 meters long, 8 meters wide and 5 meters high. A royal throne presided by a golden crown was placed in the portico's central niche, and the sculptures of King Philip IV and Queen Mariana of Austria were placed on either side of the throne; the account of the celebration extolled the faithfulness of the two portraits to the point that the dresses were identical to those worn by the monarchs that day. From the central niche, the decorative program was completed with eight niches on each side, presided over by their corresponding golden bulk sculpture: on one side, the sculptures represented the genealogy of the German Habsburgs (that is, Mariana's ascendants) and, on the other, the genealogy of the Spanish Habsburgs (Philip IV's ancestors). Some paintings showing the main historical deeds of each of those 16 members of the Habsburg dynasty were located in the portico's in-between column spaces [Noticia del recibimiento i entrada 1650].

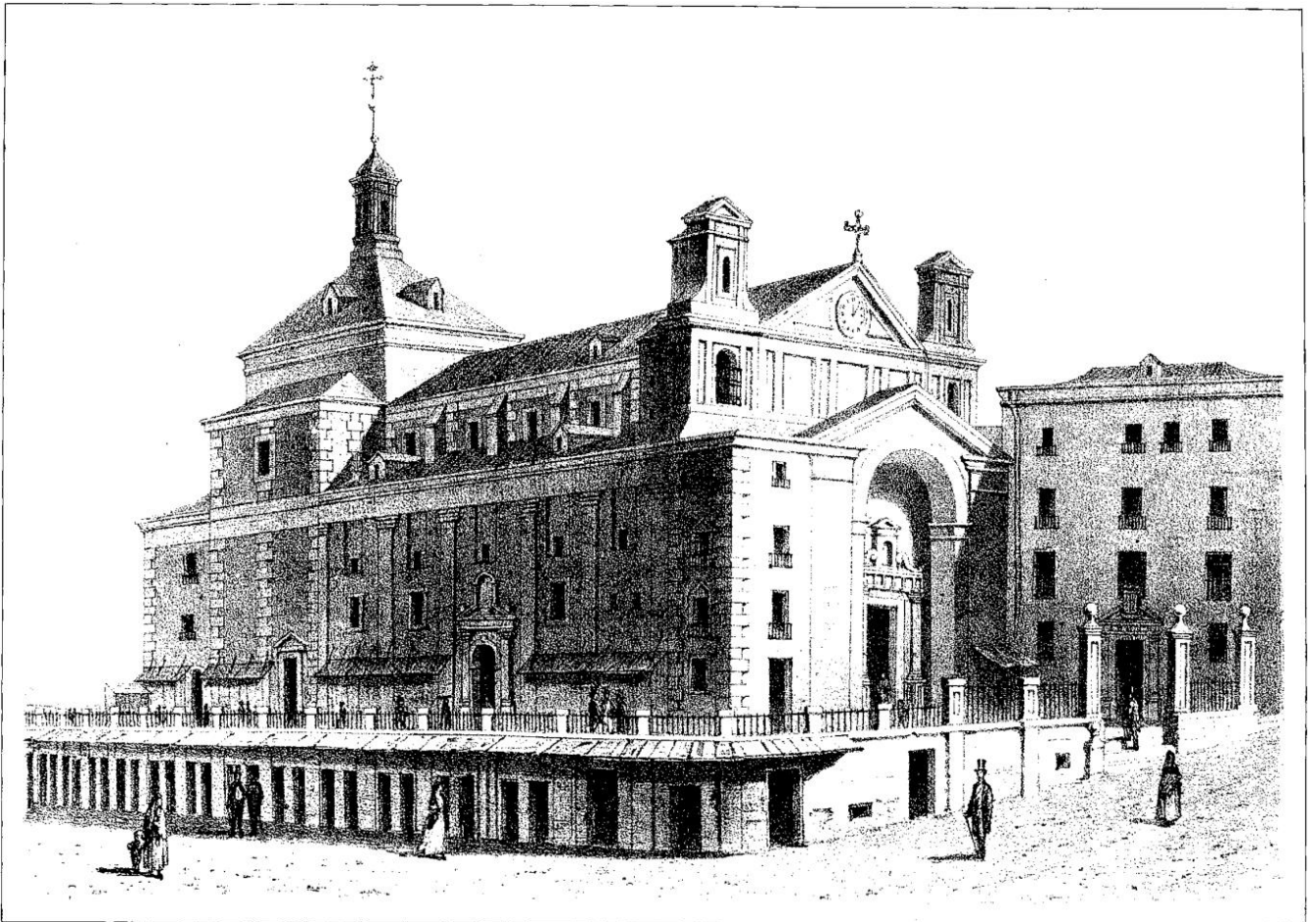
It is interesting to point out that this magnificent decorative program displayed at San Felipe's bleachers in 1649 had deep significance and was full of symbolic references to the Habsburg Dynasty that already had a long-standing tradition. In this regard, the choice of Doric order was not by chance: since Antiquity the Doric was associated with masculine proportions and fortress values. The Spanish sovereigns instrumentalized the use of Doric order by associating it with the kings of their dynasty. Philip II used Doric order with these connotations in the Monastery of San Lorenzo de El Escorial, but also in ephemeral

MARGARITA ANA VÁZQUEZ MANASSERO

decorations such as the triumphal arch that was devoted to the king himself and erected on *Calle Mayor* in 1570, on the occasion of the Queen's Ana of Austria arrival in Madrid [López de Hoyos 2007, 197]. All the above underlines the symbolic relevance of the genealogy of King Philip IV and Queen Mariana of Austria and its close relationship to the importance of the urban space of exhibition: San Felipe's bleachers.

Further, the proximity of San Felipe to the *Alcázar* turned this monastery into a space often visited by the royal family, the nobility and the courtiers, and in its urban environment, there were some of the palaces of the great lords of the time. Not by chance, it was next to San Felipe, on the *Calle Mayor*, where one of the greatest scandals of Philip IV's court took place: on August 21, 1622, don Juan de Tassis y Peralta, count of Villamediana, was killed there at the hands of a muffled man, while travelling in a horse-drawn carriage accompanied by don Luis Méndez de Haro.

The event caused rivers of ink to flow at the Court and the city's 'mentideros'. In the 19th century, this famous episode, full of romantic overtones, was represented by the painter Manuel Castellano in the homonymous canvas «The Death of the count of Villamediana». The most interesting thing on this painting is the urban scenario depicted at the background: San Felipe El Real. Castellano painted the canvas in 1868, the convent had already been demolished, yet the artist took care to reproduce its architecture as faithfully as



2: José Cebrián (based on José de Avrial's drawing), *San Felipe El Real Convent*, lithography included in José Amador de los Ríos (1863). *Historia de la Villa y Corte de Madrid*, vol. 3, Madrid.

possible, based on the lithography carried out by José Cebrián in the first decades of the 19th century (fig. 2). In turn, the lithography took inspiration from a previous drawing by José María Avrial [Díez García 1988]. Thus, these three visual documents – Avrial's drawing, Cebrián's lithography and, finally, Castellano's canvas – reproduce San Felipe's urban environment, church and bleachers morphology at the twilight of its history. Moreover, the famous bleachers are clearly visible on Castellano's painting, where a crowd of people gathered amid the confusions about the count of Villamediana's murder.

2. Merchants, artists and backbiters around San Felipe El Real.

San Felipe's bleachers were not only a relevant urban enclave in terms of stating of power, but also an important commercial center in Madrid, as the booksellers and printers were one of the most significant groups that settled there.

As a consequence, San Felipe's bleachers and *covachuelas* became a place that was usually visited and immortalized by Spanish Golden Age writers and, even, the scene of an open literary war. For instance, the *Expostulatio Spongiae a Petro Turriano Ramila pro Lupo a Vega Carpio* was published in 1618. The document, signed by a certain Julio Columbario, had the purpose to respond to the bitter criticism libel towards Lope de Vega made by some Aristotelian preceptists the year before and entitled *Spongia*.

The *Expostulatio* was followed by an interesting narration titled *Oneiropaeagnion sive iocus*, where the author's reverie moves to San Felipe's bleachers, while observing crowds of people entering a spacious bookshop [Columbario 1618, ff. 45r-v.]. Upon accessing it, the author encountered a group of silent and thoughtful doctors, among whom he describes a bald man with a bulky face who has been identified with the writer Cristóbal Suárez de Figueroa. The choice of San Felipe's bleachers and one of its bookshops as the setting for the story was not accidental. There, the important French bookseller Jerónimo de Courbes had his shop and that bookshop had been identified as the gathering center of Lope de Vega's literary enemies, whose leaders were the aforementioned Cristóbal Suárez de Figueroa and Pedro de Torres Rámila, promoters of the referred libel *Spongia* [Entrambasguas 1967, 553]. At San Felipe's bleachers many other booksellers held their shops. For instance, Miguel Martínez's shop was a place where writers usually met to murmur [Entrambasguas 1967, 382]. It is worth mentioning that some significant books published during the first decades of the 17th century were sold at the bleachers, as stated in their respective front covers: for instance, the *Tercera Parte de las Comedias de Lope de Vega, y otros Avtores* (fig. 3), printed at the expense of Miguel Martínez himself (1613), where sold at San Felipe, as well as the *Refranes o Proverbios en Romance* (1617) by Hernán



3: Lope de Vega Carpio (1613). *Tercera parte de las Comedias de Lope de Vega, y otros avtores, con sus loas, y entremeses las quales Comedias van en la segunda oja* (front cover), Madrid, En casa de Miguel Serrano de Vargas. Vendese en la calle mayor, en las gradas de San Felipe.

MARGARITA ANA VÁZQUEZ MANASSERO

Núñez or the *Primera y segunda parte del Estilo y Metodo de escriuir cartas missivas* (1620) by Juan Vicente.

Other sort of sources inform about other booksellers and their shops that were also located at the surroundings of San Felipe, among which we can cite Pedro de Torres (documented between 1602-1610), Francisco Serrano (documented until 1680) [Agulló y Cobo 1968, 1, 11] or the best-known Antonio Mancelli, who was the bookseller, printmaker and author of the first topographical map of Madrid, dated around 1623 [Pérez Pastor 1907, 158-160; Matilla Tascón 1980].

However, many other merchants, such as painters, iron or cloth sellers settled around San Felipe, beyond booksellers. It is worth mentioning a certain cloth seller, called Cuéllar¹, who in 1598 asked permission to the convent's friars to have one of the pillars inside the church to place there an altarpiece. As for the painters, some important court artists, such as Patricio Cajés and his son, Eugenio, or Francisco López, obviously frequented the convent because they were commissioned to carry out their main altarpiece². The awareness of the privileged location of San Felipe and the crowd that usually met there surely encouraged other painters to use the convent and its urban environment as an exhibition place for their new works. For instance, Juan de Jáuregui hung his «San José with the Child Jesus asleep» in the cloister of San Felipe during the Corpus celebrations [Portús 1999, 118] and an equestrian portrait of King Philip IV by Diego Velázquez «was located on the *Calle Mayor*, in front of San Felipe, which caused the admiration of the entire Court, for emulating nature and raising envy for his Art» [Palomino 2008, 26]. Other less famous painters of the time such as Andrés de la Torre had a 'public shop' in front of San Felipe's bleachers, where the painter José de Sancha also worked at least in 1667 [Agulló y Cobo 1994, 110-111].

It is difficult to precisely determine when this commercial nucleus began to establish around San Felipe, where booksellers would become one of the most significant groups. An early documentary evidence attesting the commercial activity in the small shops attached to the convent dates back to August 20, 1598, when the monks approved that the owners of some drawers – surely to sell books – move their merchandise from the *Alcázar* courtyard to San Felipe's bleachers and settle their drawers attached to the convent wall³. Throughout the 17th century there was a gradual but constant proliferation of small shops and *covachuelas*, which the monks rented for an annual price and for a period quantified in lives. According to this usufruct conditions, a permission was given in 1600 to two officers - called Barreras - to build at their expense one of these *covachuelas*, under the main door of the church. Although currently nothing remains of San Felipe, it is likely that the morphology of those small stores attached to the convent walls resembles the book establishments that nowadays still remain open in the nearby parish of San Ginés in Madrid: they are small shops made up of wooden shelves and drawers, under a tile-roofing, attached to the exterior walls of the main building (fig. 4 and 5). The convent's Consultation Books (*Libros de consulta*) do not provide an estimate number of the shops and 'covachuelas' that existed at any given time. In this regard, we have found some interesting information from a manuscript entitled *Libro de los nombres y calles de Madrid sobre que se paga incómodas y tercias partes*, dated around 1658, in which the houses of the city, their owners and their economic value are recorded.

¹ Madrid, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Clero, Libro 6842, f. 26r.

² Madrid, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Clero, Libro 6842, f. 58r.

³ Madrid, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Clero, Libro 6842, f. 29 r.



4: Current aspect of San Ginés parish at Calle Arenal street (next to Calle Mayor street) in Madrid. Let's note some small bookshops attached to the main building (left bottom corner of the picture) that still remain today and are probably similar to those of San Felipe El Real convent during Modern Age (Picture by the author).

5: Small bookshops at San Ginés parish in Madrid at the time they are closed, which show their building under a tile-roofing; the inside is made up of wooden shelves (Picture by the author).

MARGARITA ANA VÁZQUEZ MANASSERO

According to this manuscript, in the street behind the convent, three houses were appraised – one, belonging to a certain «Gaspar chuman Mercader» – and also «Six stores that the Monastery has behind the main altar, and are incorporated to the complex» which had a total value of 107 ducats⁴. Although the total value of the six stores amounted to 107 ducats, a breakdown of the appraisal of each of them - 12, 10, 9, 6, 30 and 40 ducats, respectively - is included in the margin of the manuscript, which provide evidence for inferring that the dimensions and characteristics of each shop should be different.

As previously stated, San Felipe became around 1600 the most known 'mentidero' of Madrid and of the entire Kingdom, in parallel to this commercial activity. That means San Felipe was the place where political information and courtly rumors constantly circulated. Not surprisingly, the convent was in the vicinity of the post office where all the news of the Empire arrived and close to the Royal Palace. At first, the soldiers met at San Felipe's bleachers 'mentidero', but gradually, the blind people who reported events and songs and all kinds of curious citizens converged there and gave rise to an incipient «popular public opinion», eminently urban [Castro Isabeta 2010]. Many preserved literary sources attest about this important social feature of the city. It is worth mentioning that Cristóbal Suárez de Figueroa, the aforementioned Lope de Vega's enemy, wrote the following, when commenting on the so-called 'Maldicientes' (backbiters): «The vice of speaking evil one another, although it is very ancient among all nations, seems to have taken deeper roots in Spain. Here most people in order to acquire and demonstrate a learned opinion, bite and condemn other's virtue and letters. Witness to this truth could be particularly in Madrid, a certain place in front of San Felipe, where in various competitions and meetings, it is only about subordinating the most ignorant, to the most scientific» [Suárez de Figueroa 1615, 300].

Conclusion

On September 4, 1718, a terrible fire broke out in San Felipe convent, while the liturgical services were taking place on the occasion of the feast of Our Lady of the Consolation. At 6 in the afternoon one of the chandeliers that illuminated the main altar of the church set fire causing «ruin in the building, altarpieces, chairs, organs, silver, paintings or ornaments, and precious jewels»⁵. The tragic episode did not yet signify the end of the convent or of the commercial activity of the adjacent shops where the book trade continued during the whole 18th century [Sánchez Espinosa 2011]. However, the subsequent reform and reconstruction of the complex was going to change the physiognomy of one of the most emblematic spaces in the city of Madrid during the 17th century, until its final disappearance in the 19th century. Despite the fact that today nothing of the San Felipe convent is left, nor of its bleachers, nor of its *covachuelas*, nor of its people, the information and documental findings analyzed in this study reveals that San Felipe's environment was an essential urban space to understand the Madrid's political, commercial and cultural life especially during the 17th century. This paper contributes to recover the important social urban role of the ephemeral constructions built around the convent, the main actors who frequented the place and the books and images that were sold, read, exhibited and also criticized there. All these factors made San Felipe to become one of the most relevant urban spaces in the capital of the Spanish Monarchy, where and incipient «popular public opinion» was born.

⁴ «Seis tiendas que el Monesteterio tiene dettras del altar mayor que p[ar]te dellas estan yncorporadas en el conuento que tienen diferentes tasas y todas llegan Astar tass.das Por mayor en 107 duº». Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Ms. 5918, f. 134r.

⁵ Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Ms. 17660, ff. 260r.-v.

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