

THE TOPIC

1966: the Gerenzia Minucipal de Urbanismo of the Ayuntamiento of Madrid decreed what is called the "golpe de muerte" of the Ciudad Lineal. The urban planning department of the Spanish capital designed a master plan for the "redevelopment" of the urban sector affected by the constructions of the linear city, which basically involved the complete elimination of the pre-existing fabric and replacing it with tall modern buildings. After taking possession of the land around Arturo Soria Street, named after the founder of Ciudad Lineal, the administration began the demolition process. Arturo Soria Street had been, since the late 19th century, the "backbone" of the linear city project: an urban prototype to be built ex novo based on a main, directional artery of networked services (flows and public transportation) flanked by two bands of low-density building fabric. The theory published in 1882, came out of Arturo Soria y Mata's (1844-1920) desire to provide an alternative to the industrial Madrid of the late 19th century which was undermined by hygienic problems and overpopulation. The failure of this "pilot plan" was due to numerous factors including the lack of a solid documentary basis and adherence to an entrepreneurial, rather than scientific, urban planning process. Soria y Mata, with a pragmatic attitude, founded the limited company Compañía Madrileña de Urbanización (CMU) in 1894, which could carry out the project, and the journal "La Ciudad Lineal" (1897), to which he tasked the dissemination of linealist principles, intentions and progress. Ciudad Lineal, evading the risk of being bounded to the intangible sphere and included among utopian cities left on paper, was built by this early real estate agency (the CMU). Despite the project's limits, some 5 kilometers of linear city east of the Spanish capital are urbanized between 1894 and the 1920s; finding concreteness in reality did not provide the Ciudad Lineal with a guarantee of preservation.

By the time of the plan to turn the Ciudad Lineal into a ring road for cars and buses (1966), it had lost the features of the Sorian theory and was in a poor state of preservation. The plan involved reconstruction of the road and rapid construction of manzanas by exploiting the height of the lots to increase the housing density of the area.

Urbanization due to the economic boom channeled more and more people into the Spanish capital (the population doubled in about two decades to 3 million in 1970) and the city had to quickly make up for the need for housing. The area of the linear city, just 5 kilometers away from the Plaza del Sol and already urbanized (though much degraded), proved to be the ideal place to promote 20th-century expansion. Ciudad Lineal today is nothing more than the name of a Madrid neighborhood whose urban footprint bears witness to the original linealist idea, but which has almost entirely lost its primal architectural component.

RESEARCH PROJECT

After studying the construction of the Linear City, it now seems necessary to proceed with the investigation to better understand the project's outcome and, moreover, the role of some U.S. scholars who ensured its intangible preservation by triggering interest in the Sorian work with their essays on it.

The reasons that led to the failure of Arturo Soria y Mata's urban experiment are numerous: the death of the leader of the CMU (1920), the beginning of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), but also the formal peculiarities of a building fabric erected quickly and without the direction of a refined professional, are just some of the factors that affected the outcome. The "golpe de muerte", however, turned the spotlight on the Ciudad Lineal and beginning in the late 1960s Spanish, U.S. and Italian scholars finally became interested in the Sorian work for the first time. By the time the Plan General de Ordenación was approved, Ciudad Lineal had already received a kind of critical redemption. The leading scholar in this reevaluation process was George R. Collins (1917-1993), who in 1959 wrote two articles in the "Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians" and in 1968 published the first organic monograph on the subject. Collins conducted a profound analysis of the Spanish case at a crucial moment in its history: the Linear City was to be obliterated by the demolishing pickaxe of the urban expansion needs of the economic boom, and the restitution of the story allowed it to be safeguarded from oblivion. Moreover, thanks to international interest, Spanish scholars are beginning to investigate their compatriot's experiment.

The opportunity to examine the George R. Collins archive, now housed in the Avery Drawings and Archives (Columbia University), has provided useful new keys to the debate sparked by the decision to erase the fabric of Ciudad Lineal. Studying the transformations of the twentieth-century city and the debate generated by the Madrid administration's choice may be the key to understanding the contemporary city. Often public authorities (in the past as well as today) are faced with the need to demolish parts of cities because they are either degraded or obsolete. Nevertheless, while in the architectural field the international scientific community has identified generally agreeable guidelines, at the urban level the process is not always equally prudent. This is certainly not meant to promote a crystallization of the city inherited from the past but rather a reflection that can lead to different outcomes while ensuring the reading of the urban stratigraphy and, therefore, its narrative. However, if research can enable the preservation of the memory of urban heritage, dissemination - at multiple levels and through different channels - could ensure the enhancement of the history of urban transformations and stratifications that would otherwise be lost.