The *Universidad Laboral de Cheste*, a Modern Heritage Site Under Threat

By Carmen Jordá and Maite Palomares[1]

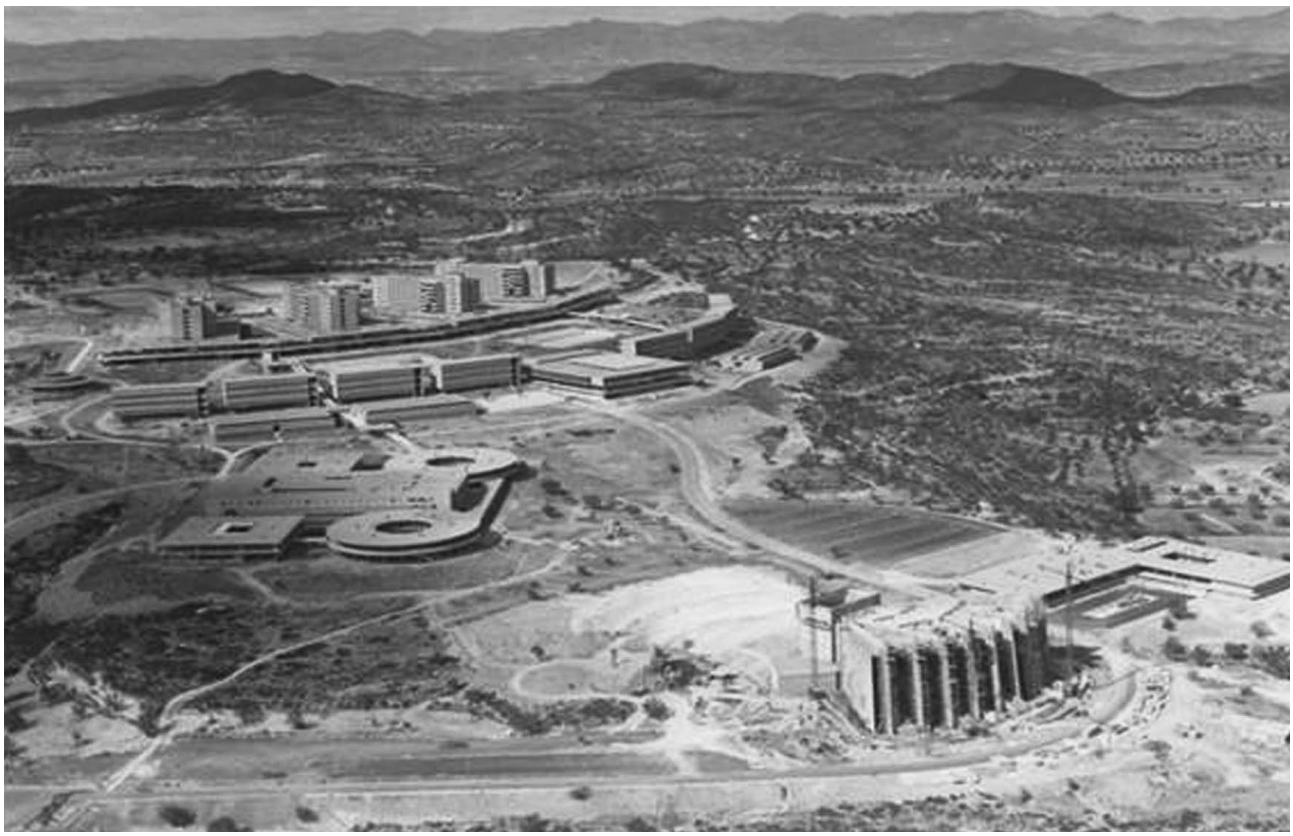
***Universidades laborales*, or workers' universities, were set up throughout Spain during the years of the dictatorship, and were aimed at professionally training the working classes. Their charitable–educational nature was established by law in 1955, although several date back to before that official date. The *Universidad Laboral de Gijón* (1946–1957) was the first to be built, as reflected in the traditional and academic architecture of Luis Moya. Fernando Moreno Barberá, one of the most important architects involved, was the author of four centres: those of Las Palmas, 1970–73, Toledo, 1970–78, Malaga 1972–78 and Cheste 1967–69, his work reflecting an undoubted assimilation of the Modern legacy.**

The *Universidad Laboral de Cheste*, the largest of these, represents an important increase in scale as it was designed to house as many as 5,000 boarding students of up to 14 years of age. Its architect, who graduated in Madrid in 1940, is well-known by the publications of **docomomo** Ibérico.[2] His career is outstanding for his mastery of the trade and for his notable planning skills. Both characteristics may have been strengthened during his stay between 1941 and 1943 at the office of professor Paul Bonatz, an outstanding architect from Stuttgart, who was at the time building the bridges for the motorways of the Third Reich. Later, his possible relationship with Richard Neutra, during the installation of North American bases in Spain, could also have been significant.

Before starting work on Cheste, Fernando Moreno Barberá had shown notable skill in designing university buildings in Valencia, which present similarities with those of this workers' university. The Modern Movement once again appears as the point of reference, being masterfully interpreted and evident in a vigorous plasticity that trusts in the expressive possibilities of concrete and several elaborate solar protection systems. The Cheste complex fits comfortably within several other similar international experiences, such as those of Brazil, Mexico and Caracas, all of which a cosmopolitan professional would have been familiar with through his travels or publications.

This ambitious project, envisaged for a different site on the coast, had to be urgently adapted to a hillier site within 22km of Valencia. The better conditions of the latter site recommended the change of location. Thus, a rural landscape was transformed into a small gardened city aimed at training young people, as part of the policy of General Franco, whose propaganda boasted of "record construction in Spain, built in a minimum period of time".

The complex program of requirements was approached by grouping together the various functions onto levels, under the dual premise of taking advan-



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As in the *Athens Charter*, traffic is segregated, the study of pedestrian circulation constituting a particular point of interest. These architectonic elements take on a leading role, the concrete strips marking and gradually colonizing the territory by creating spaces for coexistence and shelter for daily transit.

The change of location meant greater space for the teaching sector, as, in Cheste, there was space for eight classrooms in a row, as well as four independent workshops situated in front, whose magnificent section presents lateral and overhead illumination. As with most of his installations, there is the reiterated use of horizontal parasols, being this the resource most commonly used by Moreno Barberá and, obviously, reminding us of Le Corbusier.

This area was developed upon two circular segments, with good views and parallel to the perimeter of the grand residential platform, its centre being occupied by a luminous departmental building with an enormous gardened courtyard that was covered with creeper plants thanks to several spectacular prefabricated beams. Next to the sculptural spiral staircase, of Brazilian inspiration, the free-standing ground floors provide another example of Modernity, as well as facilitating the sheltered enjoyment of students and having an interesting visual permeability that, regrettably, has been lost in the lecture room buildings.

tage of the topology and of avoiding the drawbacks of overcrowding that simultaneous usage would produce. The sports facilities were installed on the highest level with the four-building residential area built on a common platform lower down. Beneath these were two swimming pools and, still further down, the teaching areas with eight classrooms and four workshops, as well as the departmental building which, as it occupied the greatest space in the centre, provides a hierarchical structure to this area. The nucleus of dining rooms, of great importance for so many students, consists of two circular and two square buildings situated around the grand services building. The complex also has, to one side, a medical centre and oratory with columned peristyle, similar to a *tempietto*. Finally, the representation zone is given special emphasis through the singular volume of the Main Hall that looks out onto an open-air auditorium.

Outstanding in the work of Moreno Barberá is both his talent for coming up with technical solutions and for building, which, in Cheste, is evident in the impeccable execution achieved, with reinforced concrete playing the lead role, although sharing responsibilities with brick and wood. This provides a good example of his very characteristic treatment of textures, all of which was governed by a strict economy and a module of 1.60 m throughout the entire work.

Sports Area, Residences, Public Space and Teaching Sector

Next to the sports fields, at the top, two large gymnasiums were built consisting of two delicately positioned box-like structures in the *Miesian* manner, whose main entrances have sliding doors that open almost completely. The structure is bare, with large ribs providing a technical solution for the roofing, at the same time as acting as identifying elements, along with its *brise soleil* and a horizontal louver awning.

When it came to finding a solution to the accommodation of a large number of boarders with simultaneous activities, the criterion of avoiding overcrowding is clearly evident in the residences. His approach was to divide the accommodation up into four six-storey buildings on the same level, each with its own staircase, so resulting in a singular elevation composition, alternating parapets with empty spaces.

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Figure 1. The *Universidad Laboral de Cheste* under construction, 1969.

Figure 2. The *Aula Magna*. Present state with recent interventions.

Figure 3. External louvers of the Representation Pavilion. Photos from *Arquitectura* 142, 1970.

Services Area, Dining Rooms, Main Hall and Representation Area

The services building, with kitchens, laundry and staff dormitories put the organizational capacity of the architect to the test. He had to consult abundant international bibliography, dedicating


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many pages of his technical report to the minute study of the various jobs and huge storage space that had to be provided. The fact that most of the activities were going to be simultaneous for large groups and that the decision had been taken to reject the depressing model of immense common dining rooms meant that the building program had to be divided into four constructions, which in turn, were sub-divided by partitions into six ambients, in harmony with the layout of the four residences. All the dining rooms have a large open central gardened area.

Main Hall Area

The *Aula Magna* of Cheste, with its 5,234 seats, was among the largest halls of its time, even though it was built under strict economic criteria. It is complemented by an outside amphitheatre, providing a sculptural sounding board. However, the singular image of the so-called Main Hall is characterized by its supporting structure, given that, taking its inspiration from the known Project for the Soviets,[3] it consists of several powerful concrete ribs, with carefully elaborated textures created by the formworks. The enormous volume dominates the landscape, but exhibited in its day the perforations of its strategic system of accesses and circulations–a visual delight–which today has been greatly undermined due to a perimeter enclosure wall whose elimination is recommendable.

Close by is a public square bordered by cypresses that open out to the representation space. Within the two grand intersecting rectangles are located the cafeteria, administration and President's office in a large single-storey pavilion, which, with continuous paving, provides an open and fluid space. The most interesting piece is the Salón de Grados or auditorium, the ceiling of which reflects the attractive play of light and shade of the external louvers, similar to the meshes of the Brasilia[4] Campus.

The Master Plan

With the arrival of democracy, the educational dismantling of the worker universities resulted in them becoming functionally obsolete, giving way to the partial abandonment of their installations.

The architectural interest in the *Universidad Laboral de Cheste* is undoubted and now is a good time to focus attention on it as it is gradually deteriorating. A Master Plan[5] is advisable as a tool for diagnosing and coordinating intervention strategies, as without that tool, which is commonly employed in heritage projects, isolated actions have been undertaken that have greatly undermined the essence and character of the work.

Without attempting to arrive at a definitive plan, certain observations can be made on any future undertaking:

1. To begin with the *Universidad Laboral de Cheste* should be considered as a whole. The aim should be to establish a balance between its historical significance and its program of future uses. A new educational program must always take into account its grand scale as the principle identity factor. Currently, widely differing educational uses are housed there with the management shared between two regional ministries, which independently promote activities oblivious to the site as a whole. Improvised actions must give way to a long-term and strategic program.
2. It would be desirable to classify future interventions by architectural and landscaping criteria, as the harmony of the Cheste complex lies mainly in how its layout attends to the relationship between architecture and nature. As a hierarchical criterion, the topography has been taken advantage of in order to situate and functionally group together the various zones, as well as to strategically place certain architectural elements. Fortunately, this particularity has not been altered and must be preserved.
3. It must be stressed that the vegetation was structural in the Modern sense, constituting the zero level where the supports of the buildings were situated, so enabling a horizontal reading. Another interesting aspect was the presence of native species, with easy-to-conserve plantations, which provided shaded areas as well as color. One of the best examples was the "umbráculo", or landscaped walkway, of the departmental building, covered with red bougainvilleas that acted as climate regulators. Today it is quite depressing to stroll through those formerly leafy areas.
4. It should also be remembered that the entire site has been formally designed and marked with a common language, using only three materials: "bare concrete for structures, especially manufactured grey brick walls, a little darker than the concrete, pinewood windows in their natural color to be opened onto vegetation and to incorporate them into the landscape."[6] To preserve such a striking projective idea, it is essential that any future interventions take note of the original construction code that maintains the balance between details and the whole.
5. The use of horizontal and terraced *brise-soleil* on the façades, in Le Corbusier fashion, became a recognizable stamp of Moreno Barberá, which, therefore, must remain.

Regrettably, the need for urgent intervention has been noted. It is difficult to understand why the impressive and functional solution of the Aula Magna, determined by its skeletal structure and by the open air layout of its generous circulation system was eliminated in the 1980s by an unnecessary enclosure wall. As well as eliminating the attractive play of perforations and the relationship with the landscape, problems of ventilation have been created in the services area. The original character has to be restored by knocking down that inappropriate peripheral barrier.

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Figure 4. Residences. Vertical communications core. Photo from Arquitectura 142, 1970. Present state with recent interventions.

Figure 5. Damage on the structure.

Figure 6. Free-standing ground floors. Original image from Arquitectura 142, 1970 and present situation with recent interventions.

Photos by Ximo Michavila.

As mentioned above, the peculiarity of the residences lies in its singular system of vertical communications. Recent interventions have eliminated the compartmentalization that individualized accesses and the play area on the ground floor. The staircases have been transformed into disproportionate spaces and errors of authenticity, so removing a valuable architectural contribution to the residential typology. The only piece that has been saved is without use and in danger, awaiting better times. General reconstruction would be necessary in order to recover the communications nucleus.

Under the pretext of organizing large classrooms for undertaking official exams and without appreciating the versatility of the fixtures, the appropriate partitions have been eliminated, which in the dining rooms provided privacy for the diners. Once again, then, those very useful elements must be recovered.

The wooden carpentry, which the architect chose *"because it grows old in a dignified way, as man does"*[7] has also been replaced. However, this replacement is the material that has fared worse over time and its lack of maintenance has caused the familiar appearance of aluminium profiling. In the minute constructive details one may see Moreno Barberá's intention of enhancing the relationship with the landscape, as the composition of the window space with its large glazed wall shows. Its vertical make up consists of three panes that can be opened and one fixed one, its horizontal measurement being a multiple of 1.60m, the same as the structural modulation. The idea was to combine standardized elements in order to reduce costs and achieve large usable surfaces. The replacement carpentry clearly spoils the whole effect.

Regarding the *in situ* concrete, Moreno Barberá decided to leave it bare and to have wooden lath formworks made for all the design parts and with meeting points at 90 degrees. This recognized finish is present throughout the whole, although today the designs are suffering various types of damage mainly through oxidation of the frames due to leaks and lack of maintenance.

Finally, the occupation of the free-standing ground floors, a product of building greed, has eliminated the visual transparency so common in Modern architecture.

In short and following the above account of the situation, the main tasks of a Master Plan would be to reorganize, restore and revitalize the Universidad Laboral de Cheste.

To conclude, it is significant that a web page of the Association of Former Pupils of the Universidad Laboral de Cheste now exists, where users are appealing for action. There it says:

On the initiative of the Association of Former Pupils of the Universidad Laboral de Cheste and with the support of recognised professionals, the undersigned appeal to the competent authorities of the Comunitat Valenciana to, as soon as possible, restore the original image of the Main Hall of the Educational Complex of Cheste, formerly the Universidad Laboral, a masterpiece by Fernando Moreno Barberá, in order to remove the brick wall that encloses its main façade [...]

Notes

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3. Jordá Such, Carmen, *Universidad Laboral de Cheste, 1967-1968*, Colegio de Arquitectos de Almería, *Archivos de Arquitectura España siglo XX*, 2005.
4. Rosenthal Schlee, Andrey, "The Campus of the University of Brasilia". **docomomo** International Journal 43, 2010.
5. Palomares Figueres, Maite, "*La singularidad de la Universidad Laboral de Cheste: la gran escala, el abandono y la necesidad de intervenir*", Paper presented at the VIII Congreso **docomomo** Ibérico, Málaga, 2012.
6. Moreno Barberá, Fernando, "*Centro de Orientación de Universidades Laborales Jesús Romeo, Cheste, Valencia*", Arquitectura 142, 1970, 18-26.
7. Project report. Personal archive of Carmen Jordá.