

BUILDING NATURE WITH ARCHITECTURE

**Plaza Mayor at the Campus of the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid in
Cantoblanco. Javier Fresneda and Javier Sanjuán, architects**

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Can Nature be built? Can Architecture build Nature? Can architects build the Landscape?

The building that architects Javier Fresneda and Javier Sanjuan have constructed on the Cantoblanco Campus of the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid is a piece of nature built, very well built.

The architects in a tour de force not easy, have raised and have solved with rigor and brilliance a crucial problem in contemporary architecture, in the always debated relationship between architecture and nature. They were asked for buildings to house different services of the University and they have given them a Plaza Mayor. They have given them a "hare for a cat", since the competition they won with this project in 2007.

It is enough to carefully analyze the impeccable floors, in which the free contour is built in effective dialogue with the topography, forming part of it, shaping it. And also the interior of these plants, everything is also impeccably ordered.

But the most important thing, what interests us most, is the central idea of this building which is a non-building, which is a non-natural, artificial nature. With the blessed artificiality of Architecture, "art-fact". That central idea of converting the artifact into a space of crossing circulations capable of connecting all the roads of the open campus of the University.

Isn't this building a building where the roofs are used and made passable. What many architects do now by planting a lawn on the roof in order to declare their buildings sustainable and modern.

Here, hand in hand with the topography, with nature, it was the other way around. A transit has been defined, a crossroads, an architectural promenade, and then the requested functions have been arranged inside it.

In this case, they have not taken advantage of the roofs and then planted them with grass and made them crossable. On the contrary, they have proposed a spatial mechanism to cross and sew the Campus, some planes and ramps, connecting paths, and then they have housed under those planes, inside them, the requested functions.

Here a landscape has been built, inside which the services, dining rooms and cafeterias have been placed. And they have taken advantage of the parking lot as a project material to topographically fit the whole, instead of excavating the usual basement.

In the past, Plazas Mayores were made up of buildings aligned on their perimeter, both on their facades and on their cornice, and they were usually rectangular or square. In

the old Plazas Mayores, the buildings served the empty space. Here the void serves the central space around which the functions are articulated.

The Plaza is constituted here in a space whose form is established by the architects as a premise, in this case as a crossroads of circulations in the vast University City of the Autónoma in this open Campus.

If before the buildings folded to the shape, here the shape of the square, diverse, folds to the buildings that constitute it.

If before the Plaza was crossed to access the buildings it served, here the buildings are crossed from above and the Plaza -plaza? is a void to breathe, as a background for the figure of this architecture that is made by building the landscape.

Some architects of the new generations, fearful of not being modern according to the imposition of all the magazines in use, tilt and fold and twist and twist, without sense. And they plant gardens on the roofs or on the party walls or wherever. Just because it is fashionable.

In this project, Fresneda and Sanjuan have tilted and folded and turned and twisted, always with criterion, and have built, I insist, a piece of Nature in continuity with the existing. They have built their own landscape.

Fresneda and Sanjuan, who have already shown signs of knowing how to temper the Arquitectura bull well, have done a masterful job here.

They already understood very well, with a new and effective perspective, the problem of the relationship between Architecture and Nature in their stupendous building for the Extension of the Faculty of Pharmacy of the Complutense University, in the heart of the University City of Madrid.

They erected an elongated box with a mirror facade to the north, capable of reflecting the poplar forest they planted in front of it to the south. The result is beautiful and simple.

In both cases, in both buildings, they have made this attempt to build Nature with Architecture a reality. If only many of the buildings that have been and are being constructed for the University were built by architects as good as them. Fresneda and Sanjuan, masters.