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# LT 3

PATRIMONIO Y  
REHABILITACIÓN



## HERITAGE AND REHABILITATION / PATRIMONIO Y REHABILITACIÓN

- p. 565-574: **NEW KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE CHURCH OF SANTA MARÍA IN CARMONA** / p. 575-585: **NOVEDADES EN TORNO A LA IGLESIA DE SANTA MARÍA DE CARMONA**  
Ojeda Barrera, Alfonso
- p. 587-596: **GEOMETRY AND CONSTRUCTION THROUGH THE SACRED SPACE OF ANDRÉS DE VANDELVIRA** / p. 597-607: **GEOMETRÍA Y CONSTRUCCIÓN A TRAVÉS DEL ESPACIO SACRO DE ANDRÉS DE VANDELVIRA**  
Estepa Rubio, Antonio
- p. 609-619: **AN APPROACH TO THE IDEAL CONCEPT OF URBAN PLANNING IN THE 18TH CENTURY: COLONIAL SETTLEMENTS IN ANDALUSIA** / p. 620-630: **APROXIMACIÓN AL URBANISMO IDEAL EN EL S. XVIII: LAS NUEVAS POBLACIONES DE COLONIZACIÓN EN ANDALUCÍA**  
Quevedo Rojas, Carlos
- p. 631-642: **POWER PLANT REUTILIZATION STRATEGIES ENEL POWER PLANTS AND PORT OF GENOA CASE-STUDY** / p. 643-655: **ESTRATEGIAS DE REÚSO DE LAS CENTRALES ELÉCTRICAS. LAS CENTRALES ENEL Y EL CASO ESTUDIO DEL PUERTO DE GÉNOVA**  
Olivieri, Davide
- p. 657-664: **TECHNICAL-TECHNOLOGICAL AND MATERIALS COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS BETWEEN ITALIAN AND SPANISH MEDIEVAL SHIPYARD (THE CASE OF VENICE AND SEVILLE)** / p. 665-673: **ANÁLISIS COMPARATIVO TÉCNICO-TECNOLÓGICO Y DE MATERIALES ENTRE LOS ASTILLEROS MEDIEVALES ITALIANOS Y ESPAÑOLES (LOS CASOS DE VENECIA Y SEVILLA)**  
Debenedictis, Domenico; Robador González, María Dolores; Pagliuca, Antonello
- p. 675-684: **STRATEGIES FOR CONSERVATION OF RELIGIOUS HERITAGE IN THE METROPOLITAN AREA OF LYON/SAINT-ÉTIENNE (FRANCE). SHORT RESEARCH STAY AND METHODOLOGICAL TRANSFER** / p. 685-695: **ESTRATEGIAS PARA LA CONSERVACIÓN DEL PATRIMONIO ECLESIAÍSTICO EN LA METRÓPOLIS LYON/SAINT-ÉTIENNE (FRANCIA). LA ESTANCIA BREVE INVESTIGADORA COMO VÍA DE TRANSFERENCIA METODOLÓGICA**  
Mascort-Albea, Emilio J.; Meynier-Philip, Mélanie
- p. 697-709: **HYDRAULIC HERITAGE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE TERRITORY: THE IRRIGATION COMMUNITIES** / p. 710-722: **EL PATRIMONIO HIDRÁULICO EN LA CONSTRUCCIÓN DEL TERRITORIO: LAS HEREDADES**  
Delgado Quintana, Guacimara
- p. 723-731: **SUSTAINABILITY AND CONSERVATIVE REHABILITATION OF EXTREMADURAN PATRIMONIAL RURAL ARCHITECTURE AGAINST CLIMATE CHANGE. VEGAVIANA, CASE STUDY** / p. 732-741: **SOSTENIBILIDAD Y REHABILITACIÓN CONSERVADORA DE LA ARQUITECTURA RURAL PATRIMONIAL EXTREMEÑA CONTRA EL CAMBIO CLIMÁTICO. VEGAVIANA, CASO DE ESTUDIO**  
Bote Alonso, Inmaculada
- p. 743-754: **TOWARDS A METHODOLOGY FOR THE ASSESSMENT OF VISUAL IMPACT CAUSED BY RENEWABLE ENERGY FACILITIES ON THE LANDSCAPE IN CULTURAL HERITAGE SITES** / p. 755-766: **HACIA UNA METODOLOGÍA DE VALORACIÓN DEL IMPACTO VISUAL CAUSADO POR INSTALACIONES DE ENERGÍA RENOVABLE EN EL PAISAJE EN EL ENTORNO DE LUGARES PATRIMONIO CULTURAL**  
Diego Rodríguez, Jesús Carlos; Chías Navarro, Pilar
- p. 767-772: **THE URBAN RENOVATION IN PUEBLA, MEXICO. THE HISTORICAL CENTER AS EXPERIMENTAL SPACE. THIRTY YEARS OF CITY TRANSFORMATION** / p. 773-779: **LA RENOVACIÓN URBANA EN PUEBLA, MÉXICO. EL CENTRO HISTÓRICO COMO ESPACIO EXPERIMENTAL. TREINTA AÑOS DE TRANSFORMACIÓN DE LA CIUDAD**  
Cortés Moreno, Jorge David
- p. 781-790: **THE ORNATE IN THE ARCHITECTURE OF TENERIFE AND GRAN CANARIA: 1865-1935** / p. 791-800: **EL ORNATO EN LA ARQUITECTURA DE TENERIFE Y GRAN CANARIA: 1865-1935**  
Sabina González, José Antonio
- p. 801-807: **THE CONSERVATION OF THE CONSTRUCTIONS LOCATED ON PROTECTED NATURAL AREAS: RESEARCH EXPERIENCE IN DOÑANA** / p. 808-815: **LA CONSERVACIÓN DE LO CONSTRUIDO EN LOS ESPACIOS NATURALES PROTEGIDOS: EXPERIENCIA DE INVESTIGACIÓN EN DOÑANA**  
Rincón Calderón, José María; Galán Marín, Carmen; Sanchez Fuentes, Domingo
- p. 817-827: **TRANSHUMANCE HERITAGE IN THE STRUCTURING OF THE LANDSCAPE, CITIES AND ARCHITECTURE** / p. 828-838: **EL PATRIMONIO DE LA TRASHUMANCIA EN LA VERTEBRACIÓN DEL TERRITORIO, LA CIUDAD Y LA ARQUITECTURA**  
Gutiérrez Pérez, Nicolás
- p. 839-848: **INTERVENTION IN THE HERITAGE OF RURAL COLONIZATION ARCHITECTURE. THE VILLAGES OF LOS MONEGROS** / p. 849-859: **INTERVENCIÓN EN EL PATRIMONIO DE LA ARQUITECTURA RURAL DE COLONIZACIÓN. LOS POBLADOS DE LA COMARCA DE LOS MONEGROS**  
Prieto Mochales, Luis
- p. 861-870: **MODERN ARCHITECTURE IN MANZANILLO, COLIMA, MEXICO 1930-1970 (TRANSFER AND ADAPTATION)** / p. 871-880: **ARQUITECTURA MODERNA EN MANZANILLO, COLIMA, MÉXICO 1930-1970 (TRANSFERENCIA Y ADAPTACIÓN)**  
Yáñez Ventura, Marco Antonio; López García, J. Jesús
- p. 881-893: **FIRST INTERNATIONAL ARCHITECTURAL JOURNEY OF JUAN MADRAZO** / p. 894-906: **PRIMER VIAJE INTERNACIONAL ARQUITECTÓNICO DE JUAN MADRAZO**  
Fernández Martínez, Margarita María
- p. 907-918: **HOUSES, COURTYARD TENEMENT HOUSING, INNS AND SHOPS IN 16TH SEVILLE. ARCHITECTURE, DRAWING AND GLOSSARY OF MASTER BUILDERS** / p. 919-930: **CASAS, CORRALES, MESONES Y TIENDAS EN LA SEVILLA DEL SIGLO XVI. ARQUITECTURA, DIBUJO Y LÉXICO DE ALARIFES**  
Núñez González, María
- p. 931-939: **TOWARDS THE CONSTRUCTION OF ATLAS OF SURVIVING ARCHITECTURES** / p. 940-949: **HACIA LA CONSTRUCCIÓN DEL ATLAS DE ARQUITECTURAS SUPERVIVIENTES**  
Tejera Mujica, Noemi
- p. 951-960: **TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE ALCÁZAR OF SEVILLE THROUGH ITS IMAGES (1902-1969)** / p. 961-971: **TRANSFORMACIONES DEL REAL ALCÁZAR DE SEVILLA A TRAVES DE SUS IMÁGENES (1902-1969)**  
Bañasco Sánchez, Pablo
- p. 973-980: **THE ARCHITECTURE OF POWER. THE ISLAND INSTITUTIONS AND AUTONOMOUS BODIES. ANALYSIS OF THE CASES: GRAN CAÑARIA, TENERIFE AND MADEIRA** / p. 981-987: **LA ARQUITECTURA DEL PODER. LAS INSTITUCIONES INSULARES Y ORGANISMOS AUTÓNOMOS. ANÁLISIS DE LOS CASOS: GRAN CANARIA, TENERIFE Y MADEIRA**  
Hernández Cruz, Ricardo Kevin
- p. 989-998: **PROPOSAL FOR AN INDICATORS SYSTEM OF URBAN INTEGRATION OF THE MARITIME PORTS HERITAGE** / p. 999-1009: **PROPUESTA PARA UN SISTEMA DE INDICADORES DE INTEGRACIÓN URBANA DEL PATRIMONIO PORTUARIO MARÍTIMO**  
De las Peñas García, Jesús
- p. 1011-1020: **EMPIRICAL METHOD APPLIED IN RESEARCH ON RESIDENTIAL ENERGY RETROFITTING** / p. 1021-1031: **MÉTODO EXPERIMENTAL EN LA INVESTIGACIÓN SOBRE REHABILITACIÓN ENERGÉTICA RESIDENCIAL**  
Escandón, Rocío; Blázquez, Teresa; Martínez-Hervás, Mónica; Suárez, Rafael; Sendra, Juan José
- p. 1033-1042: **AESTHETICS OF RUINS AND ETHICS OF ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN: NEW INTERVENTIONS ON ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE** / p. 1043-1053: **ESTÉTICA DE LAS RUINAS Y ÉTICA DEL PROYECTO ARQUITECTÓNICO: NUEVAS INTERVENCIONES EN EL PATRIMONIO ARQUEOLÓGICO**  
Bagnato, Vincenzo Paolo

# THE ORNATE IN THE ARCHITECTURE OF TENERIFE AND GRAN CANARIA: 1865-1935

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**Abstract:** This document is part of an ongoing doctoral thesis on the ornamentation of the façades of the Canary Islands. It is studied the decoration that presents the architectural exterior of the buildings, mainly in the island of Tenerife and of complementary form in the island of Gran Canaria, between the years 1865 and 1935.

The decorative motifs are animals, humans and vegetables, although the latter are the most abundant, being vital to identify the languages that use them within the aforementioned chronology. Also included in this work are geometric motifs that stand out for some cause, such as their singularity or because they are repeated in different buildings and therefore may have some interest. The elements that complement this decoration are also under study, such as chapter, balusters, ironworks etc.

This work combines written research, either through the bibliography or the consultation of the license files of construction of historical archives, with the field work, which involves the direct taking of photographic data directly from the facades to your study.

Subsequently, a registry is created to help protect this decoration and, based on it, to carry out the subsequent study that allows achieving objectives, such as comparisons with the decorations of other places.

**Keywords:** Facade, Decoration, Language, Style, Ornament.

## 1. Introduction

From the end of the fifteenth century onwards, Europe's commercial relations reached an international character (Galante 1983), and the Canary Islands, due to their geographic location, were on the path of expansion. This activity also favoured a cultural exchange.

The external influence that brought with it, was reflected in the facades of buildings and approximately between 1865 and 1935 there was a guideline, which draws attention for its expressiveness in terms of ornamental elements reliefs and details, in a decorative combination that characterizes several languages some of them almost synchronic, that occur in the Canary Islands.

Languages like the *Eclectic*, the *Modernist*, the *Romantic Classicist* or the *Academics* are the subject of the present study.

These languages lend themselves to a certain controversy on the part of diverse authors, because with the eclecticism is broken with the idea to identify a style with certain formal norms of construction that also was associated to a determined period, as it happened with the gothic. This normalized circumstance that was present until the middle of the nineteenth century, when neoclassical architecture came into disuse, later changed with eclecticism, because now the architectural styles of the past were recovered with different modalities, to compose a final result; with which, it can't be considered in principle like an own style (Franchez 2009).

Other studies confirm that when the eclecticism was consolidated, it acquired a great importance as an intellectual process, being able nowadays to consider like a valid style, that taking from each period the elements of more quality gave place to a unique language (García 1996).

This search for history as a reference centered on the Middle Ages, but followed the model of the Renaissance, and in Spain, Gothic coincided with the Plateresque and Renaissance architecture, provoking an artistic moment that could be considered as eclectic (García 2009).

Eclecticism, therefore, possessed a design freedom not seen so far, which broke with the rigid canons and censors of the Academy and tradition, avoiding to limit the talent of the architect, allowing the creation of novel works of great sensitivity away from style commitments (Fernández 1996). This creative audacity was not shared by all because due to caution to the unknown, some architects resorted to historicism, but even if an important knowledge of the past was demonstrated, the final work was of lesser artistic value (Fernández 1996).

Also the term *modernist* has its controversies, because it does not have a precise meaning. It can be used to define the art of an age in which a great variety of tendencies and directives were found, with an intention of rupture with the past and search for new forms of expression (Fontbona 1988). Spain was characterized by the imitation of this trend of the most culturally notorious countries, taking into account that modernism was not synthesized in a style, but in an attitude towards artistic creation or a movement, being the most publicized of modernism *Art Nouveau*, which caused him to identify with modernism, not without creating some confusion of terms (Fontbona 1988).

This tendency, had different names in different countries, which is difficult to synthesize it in the same denomination, but it seems that it opts for the generic denomination of *Art Nouveau* between the critics, being an expression applicable to the architecture and the plastic arts in general, because the term Modernism must be used in a broader sense encompassing all artistic and literary manifestations that seek creative change (Freixa 1986). But it must be borne in mind that it can't be used as a generic term applicable to the whole of the modern period, but dedicated to certain works to differentiate them from other (Harrison 2000).

Romantic classicist language appeared in Europe and was introduced in Spain in 1833 but it is necessary to clarify that at that time, some patterns of classicism were pointed out for some and romanticism for others. Romanticism, in fact, fled from the Greco-Roman classicist tradition based on certain formal rules, and was characterized as exalting aspects such as freedom, feelings or nature, contrasting their creativity against neoclassical imitation. Romantic classicist, therefore, came to possess an open, flexible and adaptable spirit, since it was in the century of eclecticism (Gallardo 1984). The introduction of this language in the islands was favoured by the establishment of architects who introduced this new order in the islands like Manuel de Oraa.

## 2. The investigation

To have a more complete view, bibliographic consultation is necessary. Identifying aspects such as languages and observing how the subject has been treated is fundamental for determining historiographical gaps.

The main source of information is the facades themselves of the buildings. Once the buildings of interest are located, photographs are taken, making general and detailed records to recognize the façade. Not only are the most well-known buildings included, but also those that are often overlooked, generally non-capital cities, which although less studied are not less important, as they also have ornamental details to consider.

Then proceed to visit the municipal archives, locating the buildings that include in their plans this type of ornament. The records are consulted to locate the ones that coincide with the houses we have photographed and also the ones that do not, if they have a decoration of interest.

With all the material is made an appendix that will serve as a basis for further study. It has a detailed tab of each property, including the photographic record of each ornamental detail to be able to assign a classifier number and work with him.

Once the appendix is finished, you can start working on establishing relationships, coincidences, both internal and external influences, combinations, and so on. Which will be shown some examples later. Establishing an ornamental relationship between different places contributes to completing the information we possess and to better understanding the historical relationships between them.

### 2.1. The bibliography

This artistic expression has been treated in numerous literary works but an ornamental classification as detailed as the present study is not present. The most important buildings are collected in various publications but only show some significant ornamental details.

There are works of great value, with classifications that include schematic drawings, establishing an order number according to their type layout and variety of design, and including photographs, as *Martín Rodríguez* shows in his book, *Arquitectura Doméstica Canaria*, but in general and without go into too many specific details.

*Darias Príncipe* makes a classification of buildings according to the architectural language, in his book *Ciudad, arquitectura y memoria histórica 1500-1981: Santa Cruz de Tenerife*, complemented with the history of each building among other data of interest, but without entering any classification retailer.

This same author, in his book *Arquitectura y arquitectos en las Canarias occidentales, 1874-1931* includes plans of the Historical Archive, as well as great information both of the buildings and the most important architects of the islands and with some ornamental details, but taken from a general form.

In other cases, there may be works by authors with several facets in the arts, but also have been dedicated to architecture and can contribute to enrich the present study, because although they do not

present ornamental classifications, they may include some ornaments or additional information from the building to which belongs as *Hernández Socorro* shows in his book *Manuel Ponce de León y la arquitectura de Las Palmas en el siglo XIX*.

The languages of the buildings included in the present study may have influence from other previous styles, which can be enriching to consult bibliography dealing with languages of other dates, such as the book *Elementos del gótico en la arquitectura canaria* by *Galante Gómez*.

It also seeks a bibliography that provides additional information on the training of architects or explain the decision to use a particular decoration on their facades. In this sense *Darias Príncipe's* book entitled *Arquitectura en Canarias: 1777-1931* is very suitable.

It has also been made the consultation of other works outside the Canary Islands such as:

The publication made by *Fernando Vegas* and *Camila Mileto* for Valencia, titled *Centro Histórico de Valencia. Ocho siglos de arquitectura residencial*, on which the author has recently provided us with some documentation. This work, which includes a large number of questions, from ordinances to architectural elements, etc., also includes details that may complement the present study. An example can be found in the section dedicated to schedules and signatures, which basically represent the date of construction or the initials of the promoter or architect, a practice that goes back to the oldest civilizations (Mileto and Vegas 2015). This information on the building, which is also represented in an ornamental way, serves the double function of useful and decorative and is also a very common practice in buildings of some importance in the Canary Islands. Among the most used locations is the central part of the lintels, imitating the key and superimposing the initials of the owner at the time of construction, whose name appears in the corresponding license of the municipal archives. Another way of representing these characters is made through banners, preferably in the central part of the covers, for being a prominent place; or on the parapet of the balconies, because it is an area near the street and easily readable by the pedestrians, because sometimes the name of the trade is represented and its propaganda is facilitated.

In *Riegl's* book entitled *Problemas de estilo: fundamentos para una historia de la ornamentación* a very interesting study is made of the evolution of ornamentation, from its simplest origins with rectilinear forms, to organic forms, men and animals, allowing the identification of certain elements that are still used in the façades. Plant motifs are confirmed as the most used, and this work describes how to represent them in different cultures. There have been copies of vegetable motifs of the ancient East perfected by the Greeks (Riegl 1980) who have come to us.

From the most general publications you can get information on certain designs and their origins, to understand their forms and evolutions as in the book *La enciclopedia de la decoración* from *Racinet*. Its leaves from different countries and eras allows to identify certain forms that are still used, such as the rosettes (Racinet 1992), which in the Canary Islands are shown combined with other ornamental forms as can be seen in figure 9.

The book *Técnica del ornamento actual* from *Kentdoy* contributes to throw light on some geometric lines that have reached to our days (Kentdoy 1960), because the present study also incorporates geometric motifs if they have a special interest.

Another aspect that is included in the facades, although few cases, but of clear external influence are the subjects in grotesco. For this *Müller* publication titled *El ornamento icónico y la arquitectura: 1400-1600* reveals how the intermediate state between the human and the vegetal (Müller 1985) can form part of the decoration of some facades with references to its origins. Also in this work other architectural elements are studied.

Some decorative motifs presented by the Canarian façades are part of the frieze of the deck, which is decorated with borders of great beauty. Many of his designs are geometric and he uses the repetition of simpler units to compose a more complex drawing. In this sense, *Phillips's* publication titled *Diseños de repetición: Manual para diseñadores, artistas y arquitectos* is well suited to identify the different compositional modalities, considering that it has been used since ancient times and has served as a basis for current designs. The repetition design must maintain three ornamental qualities, beauty, imagination and order (Phillips 1993).

### 2.1.1. The languages

The study of the bibliography together with the records taken from the facades allows to identify the styles of the buildings. Among these languages as already mentioned we highlight the *Eclectic* and the *Modernist*, but also include *Romantic Classicist* and *Academic* among others.

*Romantic Classicism* is characterized in Tenerife by the slenderness of the hollows, accentuating the points of the facade that coincide with the structure, such as lines of ceilings or key areas such as lateral, hollow frames, deck railing etc. (Darias 2004). The ornaments with which this language is usually very simple, if included and with some exceptions, are concentrated mainly in the lintel of the window openings and doors and sometimes under the embossing engraved on the stone of the frame. The

presence of iron can be found as complementary material, usually in the parapets. The elegance, distinction and seriousness that it has given has caused that still some current projects continue inspiring in him.

The building of figure 1 has a floral design on the mentioned lintel realized engraving the stone in groove. The drawing stands out for the play of light and shadow that it generates.



**Fig. 1** Romantic Classicist Building n° 70 of the street of the Castillo. S/C Tenerife

Academics language can be found in Gran Canaria, following the basic principles of *Beaux-Arts* and with eclectic tendencies (Pérez 1981). Among its main characteristics we can highlight its classical composition and the use of Arucas stone as key material in the singular points of the facade. From the late nineteenth century until 1920 this neoclassical style was consolidated with well-defined academic rules.

In figure 2 we can see some neoclassical elements, such as the use of the pediment over some window openings and doors.



**Fig. 2** Academic building n° 11 of the street Francisco Gourié. Arucas

There came a time when classicism was brutalized and it became necessary a change that was made progressively, with elements more cheerful giving place to the language *Eclectic* (García 1996).

This language has as main characteristic, the inclusion of elements of the styles of the moment, as well as of *Modernism*, as well as of other epochs as mentioned above. In the Canary Islands, it began its career due to the School of Architecture created in 1844 in which it was incited to the discovery of new tendencies (Darias 1991). The ornaments that they present usually are in fixed places of the facade, unlike the *Modernist*, that can invade several zones.

Figure 3 shows various decorative details made by using moulds, as they are also found on other facades. This activity performed with mortar, favoured the execution of the ornaments, as it meant a faster processing time.



**Fig. 3** Eclectic Building nº 21 de la Avenuel Obispo Pérez Cáceres. Güímar

With the appearance of *Modernist*, a concept which, as already mentioned, encompasses several disciplines in order to identify itself with a movement and therefore can be named as *Art Nouveau* in terms of architecture, the design of the façades could count on ornaments occupying several places of the facade, joining different areas. Its main feature is the large vegetable motifs, such as sunflowers, whose stems curl like a whip. This very expressive option went hand in hand with eclecticism. In Santa Cruz de Tenerife this language only lasted 10 years (1903-1913), so there are very few buildings, works by the architects Antonio Pintor and Mariano Estanga (Darias 2004).

You can find buildings whose facade present some point element of modernist glimpses, but in this case it is not possible to determine the language of the building as such. A certain ironwork, a circular arrangement of jambs and lintel, or a curvilinear design of skylights are some examples that may be found in isolation.

In the building of figure 4 it is possible to be verified how the vegetal decoration of very steep twisted stems predominates and how the decoration of place changes from the lintel of the hollows to the bottom of the balcony as if of a vegetation that grows uncontrollably it was.



**Fig. 4** Modernist building nº 76 of the street Triana. Las Palmas Gran Canaria

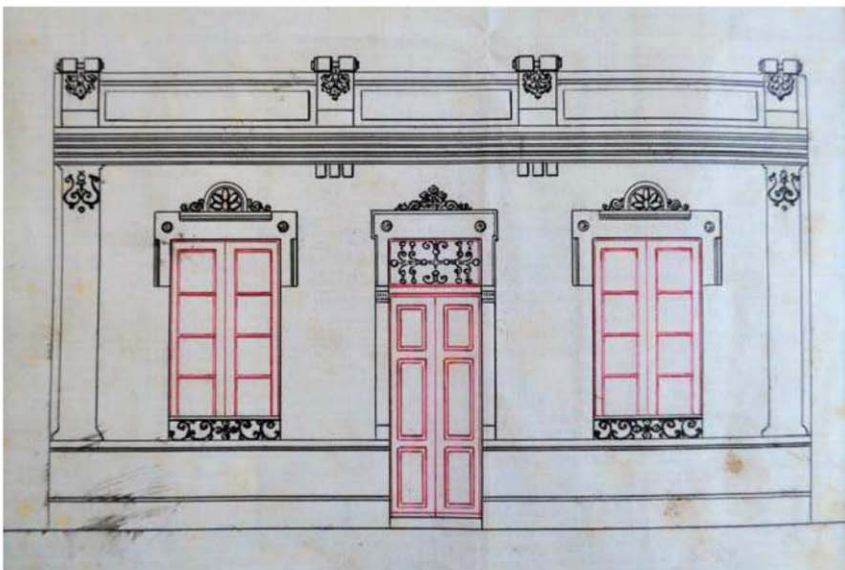
## **2.2. The municipal archives**

We have consulted the archives of the municipalities with more ornamental presence in their buildings to complement the information. The license applications for construction that are found there usually do not include all the plans of the building, but at least the facade itself, and with all the ornamental elements that were thought to execute.

The plans of the buildings identified with the existing one, are included in the tab of the same that integrates the appendix to complement it. All the ornate buildings are integrated, from the least known to the most studied because they have some importance.

Several conclusions have been drawn from this consultation, and some disagreeable, because buildings of great ornamental interest have been lost due to various causes, but fundamentally because there were no conservation criteria that have been consolidated over time. The building license has been located, and then the demolition license. In other cases they simply do not exist, and fortunately also have been identified existing buildings with their corresponding facade plane.

In the plane of the figure 5 there are some decorative elements of fixed places, using another colour to differentiate the carpentry.



**Fig. 5** Municipal Archive of La Laguna. Municipal Fund. Installation Unit 608-61

### 2.3. The appendix

With the collected material an appendix has been made that serves as the basis for the study. The main objective is to help prevent a significant part of our heritage from being lost, thanks to the elaboration of a detailed registry of the ornaments by assigning a typology. Among other objectives, the following can be mentioned:

- Perform a comparative study of the ornamentation of the facades of the island of Tenerife and then relate it to those existing in other places outside the Island.
- Establish similarities between different municipalities, which may involve the use of the same moulds, and even similarities with already disappeared models whose evidence is verified in the municipal archives.
- Identify combinations of two or more ornaments to form a composite decoration.
- Locate trends, as for similar ornaments by zones due to a particular style in a certain place.
- Make comparisons between ornaments of the same type (for example vases) etc.

Some of these objectives are shown graphically below:

#### 2.3.1. Example illustrations of the comparative study with foreign countries

Some features mentioned about *Modernism* can be checked in the examples below. The circular arrangement of jambs and lintel that presents figure 7 of Santa Cruz de Tenerife corresponds to the figure 6 of the example of Portugal, in which this effect is achieved by playing with the bars of the glazing. In both representations the floral elements of large size as well as the cross-linking of the stems.



**Fig. 6** Detail of Modernist Building nº 90 of Sá da Bandeiral Avenue. Coímbra. Portugal





**Fig. 7** Detail of building Modernist nº 3 of the street of la Rosa. S/C Tenerife

### ***2.3.2. Example of illustrations of ornamental coincidence between municipalities and ornamental combinations***

In the following images it can be seen how the coincidence between ornaments of different municipalities reveals the use of the same mould for the preparation of these elements as can be seen in the coincidence of the bracket of figure 8 with the bracket of figure 9.

Although the use of the stone allows to obtain durable pieces, its carve is very expensive and depends on the skill of the mason. With the appearance of concrete, much cheaper material, the ornaments found their ideal material resulting in buildings of great beauty.

It can also be verified, how is possible a composite ornamental composition using different simpler ornamental units. In figure 9 a balcony bracket with a rosette is combined on a top that highlights it, obtaining a more attractive bracket arrangement.



**Fig. 8** Balcony bracket of the building nº 73 of Calvario Street. La Orotava



Fig. 9 Balcony bracket of the building nº 57 of Castillo Street. S/C Tenerife

### 3. Conclusions

The defined situation of each element in the façade, allowed to realize the ornamental classification mentioned, contributing to its protection and facilitating the study.

One of the results has revealed the most used places of the facade to locate the ornaments. First, the decoration on the lintel of the window openings and doors, followed by the decoration of the parapets both in concrete and in ironworks, later the finishing of jambs, the skylight decorated on the doors, the ending of cover type tray or enclosed urn and the decorated balcony bracket.

These results are an example of the progress that results in the study of the decoration of facades, the meticulous work on them, whose novelty involves studying the decoration from another point of view. Contributions such as being able to identify different ornaments within a seemingly simple ornamental element is only possible when a considerable number of buildings are extensively studied.

The decoration of the façades of the Canary Islands is a reflection of the artistic concerns of the moment, which between 1865 and 1935 adopts a great ornamental expression, due to currents such as *Eclecticism* or *Modernism*, although other less ornamental languages are also present but no less important.

These styles that were introduced as a result of the relationship with other countries leave us an artistic legacy of great value, showing the tastes that marked an entire era, and are an important part of our historical heritage.

Various causes threaten these facades as deterioration due to the passage of time. Weather accelerates degradation processes and not enough economic resources are available for their conservation.

In addition to the research that this work supposes, it contributes to exhaustively record much of this legacy to facilitate both present and future restoration, since degradation does not understand pauses in its process and we must not fail to protect this important part of our past.

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