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A mediterranean city

Valentia was founded by Roman colonists in 138 BC, on a small island in a branch of the river Turia. Strategically located on the Vía Augusta, the commercial and military route which united the Imperial Capital of Rome with Cádiz, this urban enclave provided its new occupants with fertile lands which, being close to the Mediterranean and an abundance of natural water, were easily extendible. Added to this was the possibility of connecting with the peninsula's southern and interior routes and the extensive coastal territories to be occupied, as well as being close to the then important Roman nucleus of Saguntum.

The influence of Romanisation was a decisive element in the city's development, that is until the start of its decline and Germanic invasions brought further devastation to the already falling empire.

After the Visigoths came and went, not without leaving their mark on the city, Valencia began a long, influential period of occupation under the Moors who initiated their pacific invasion of this territory in 718 and remained until, in 1238, the city of Valencia was conquered by the Christians. Whilst there remains little in the way of any monumental vestiges of Islam, the traditions have been well preserved in irrigation and agricultural systems, gastronomy, philosophy and way of life, as well as the urban distribution and place names.





10 *Etching by A. Guesdon, A bird's eye view of Valencia, from 1858. Archive Huguet-Collection L. Giménez Lorente*

L'Albufera

L'Albufera, the nature reserve to the south of the city, begins on crossing the mouth of the new Turia and finishes practically at the foot of mount Cullera. This is actually an extensively used agricultural zone which balances its traditional fishing and agricultural pace with the constant presence of locals and tourists within its abundance of beaches and restaurants.

This park has always been considered a royal heritage site for its extraordinary natural beauty and its excellent wild duck hunting grounds and angling. This privilege was brought to an end in 1865 when the municipality successfully reclaimed the park to add to its own heritage. Besides the hunting and fishing, activities now in recession, L'Albufera is basically a huge flood plain filled with rice fields. Its fresh water supply comes from various inland springs *ullals* which permanently supply the lake and the park is connected to the sea by three channels with floodgates which regulate the level of water in the fields. The centre of the lake is called *lluent* being the spot where the waters appear to glisten the most. Arabic poets described it as the mirror of the sun.





The old course of the River Turia

Along a winding route, marked by the final meanders before reaching the sea, the old River Turia provided natural protection for centuries to the population of Valencia. The Roman colony, the origin of the city, was founded on a fluvial island, more related to the orchard crops than with maritime trade. The Romans, however, created a small port on the river, in the historic centre where today stand the Torres de Serranos, before reaching the coast.

This geographical protection of the city had its negative aspects as well. The presence so close to the river constituted the main threat and origin of destruction of the large orchard that the waters themselves had made grow, because on being a typical Mediterranean river it always had a very irregular flow and, therefore, many floods. In more recent times the Turia in reality did not go through Valencia, because when it reached the city it carried practically no water, its flow had been exhausted in irrigation and urban supplies before reaching its mouth. This has nothing in common with this description by the botanist Cavanilles in 1795: "the floods are always frightening here, because nothing stops the waters from pouring towards the orchards, but if they occur when the riverbed is full when the wood that from Santa Cruz and Moya comes downriver to supply the capital, then the damage is incalculable". It has been a long, long time since the river was the natural way to bring down the wood to be manufactured in the capital.

In 1957 the City Council made a decision after the tragic flood of October and planned to reroute the river from the centre of the city by means of what was called the South Plan, a project that also enabled an improvement in the traffic with the construction of ring roads along the new riverbanks. On their first visit to Valencia during the democratic transition, the King and Queen of Spain presented the city with the riverbed as a whole, nine kilometres long and 150 metres wide, so that the lives of the people of Valencia would gain in quality and safety. Thus, by surprise, the city, which was already famous for



Paseo de la Alameda runs along the left bank of the river and originally was an access route to the Palacio Real. The start of the paseo is indicated by two fountains

The heart of Valencia



When Valencia was first discovered by foreign travellers in the 18th century it was described it as a city of bridges and belfries, a city of orchards, gardens, palaces, churches, convents and monasteries. Frenchman Victor Hugo envisaged Valencia to be a city of a hundred bell towers as he surveyed the horizon from the Micalet, with the sea in the distance. The city's mixed profile made this a safe destination for travellers, surrounded on the outskirts by animal farmsteads and irrigated agricultural lands.

This historic centre and heart of the city, once secreted behind battlements nowadays presents itself to the visitor as a cluster of six districts in which the heart of the city still beats. This circular zone, skirted by the number 5 inner city bus route, is one of the largest surviving of any European city to still be able to testify to its urban history after almost two thousand years in existence.

The most ancient and spectacular, institutionally recognised representation of both divine and earthly power is to be found in the Barrio de La Seu, the area which leads towards Xerea, the Jewish and Arab slum districts. The vital pulse of what was once Valencia's walled city continues to revolve around the market place where the centre of gothic commerce and the modernist market are set face to face. Sant Francesc was the name given to the area which was a former monastery site and which has now been adopted by the Ayuntamiento or City Council. The old city weaved its urban expansion southwards when the nearby stretch of river dried up, opening up a route between the crops and disentailed properties. Trades craftsmen and the common people were raised in the working class districts of Carme and Velluters, where they lived in narrow cramped buildings which in many cases have failed to survive the passing of time. These five names constitute the city's basic framework, and a starting point for our tour of the city.

The city's gothic centre is equally as attractive by day as by night



Plaza de la Virgen

One of the most distinguishing features of this pedestrian plaza is water, also the element most associated with history and tradition. The solemnity of institutional and religious power is also well represented and defined within this urban space.

Beneath the shadow of the Micalet lie two great historic buildings, the Cathedral with its gothic façade and the Basílica de la Virgen de los Desamparados, raised in honour of the city's patron saint, and which continue in their religious tradition and represent an era in which a city's importance was judged by the splendour of its principal churches.

Directly facing these places of worship, the Palau de la Generalitat represents the area's first political autonomous power, Valencia being the administrative capital of the Comunidad Valenciana. Beneath the small garden facing onto the plaza this gothic architectural gem conserves the remains of the city's former Ayuntamiento from medieval times.

Each Thursday, at midday, the Tribunal de las Aguas, created in the 10th century in the time of the Moors, passed unwritten judgment, guided by the wisdom of common laws applied to the Valencian conflicts resulting from the use of the water. The court was made up of representatives from the various sections of irrigation channels which supplied the Valencian crops. In the meantime, water was to be heard gushing from the fountain which represented the waters of the Turia and the irrigation channels it supplied.

A fountain tribute to the river Turia and the water channels which irrigated Valencia's crop growing regions

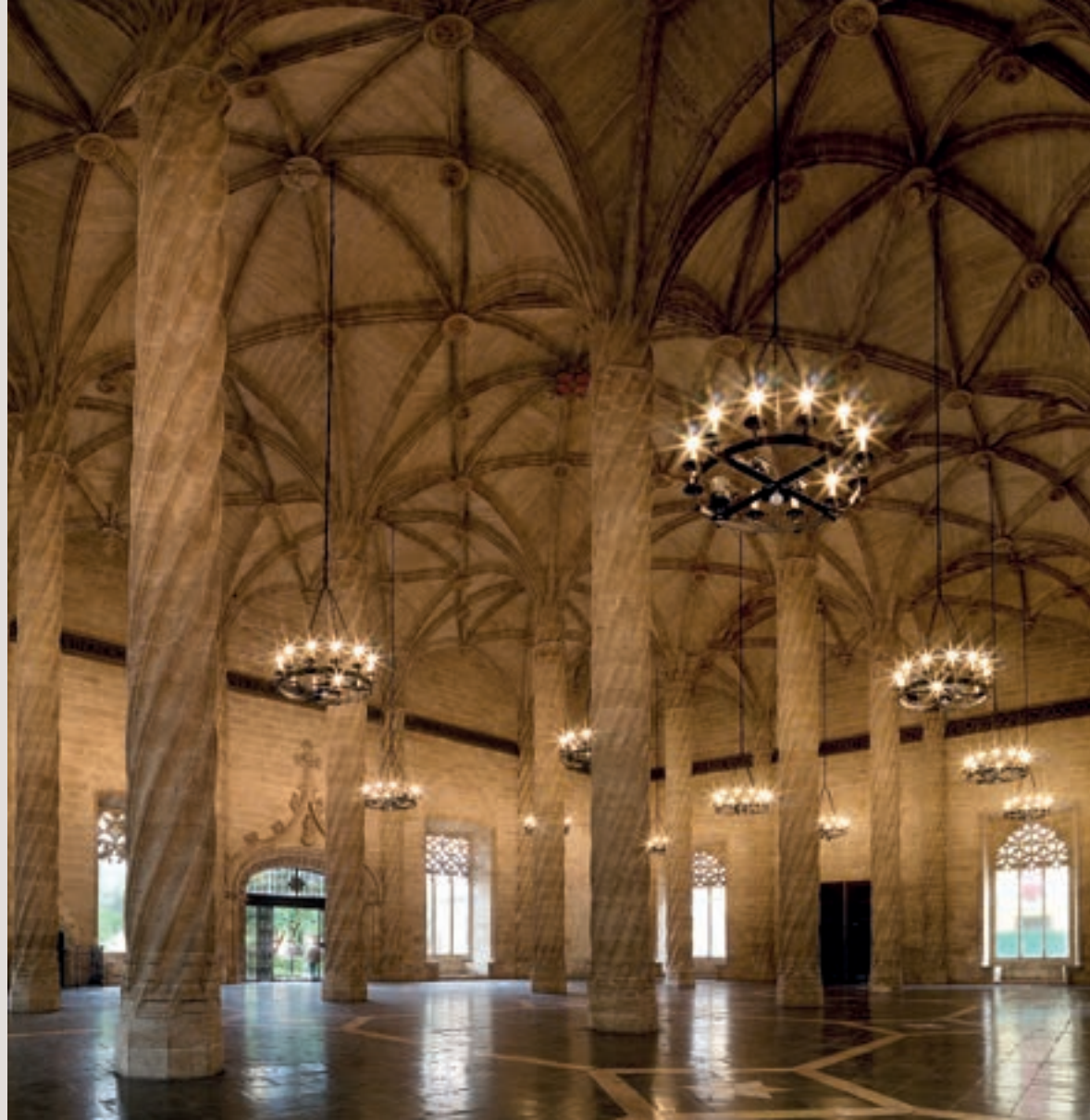
La Llotja de la Seda

Declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1996, this building is one of the most beautiful examples of Mediterranean Gothic civil architecture. Situated in the heart of the medieval quarter of the merchants, it was built as if it were a cathedral, but with the essential difference that its use was to be secular and worldly. This is because inside its walls mercantile contracting took place as well as the administering of justice in maritime lawsuits. The incipient bourgeoisie, civil society, financed its construction.

Built by Pere Compte as from 1483, it has three sections with different uses: the columned hall as a contracting space, the central towers used as a prison and the building of the Consolat del Mar reserved for the court that administered maritime law. Also here was the office of the Taula de Canvis i Depòsits, the first bank of the time the role of which was to finance the trade.

The height of more than 17 metres of the main hall enables the 24 spiral columns to open out on reaching the vault as if they were palm trees. The high part of the walls is ornamented with a long Latin inscription that highlights the goodness of commercial activity and recognises that accumulating wealth is not incompatible with gaining eternal life. The architect undertook his brilliant work guided by notable symbolisms. Their secret messages appear reflected in the gargoyles and other ornamental elements.

This Gothic area puts on its Sunday best when the King Jaume I Prizes are awarded, for scientific research and development, promoted by the Generalitat Valenciana and the Valencian biochemist Santiago Grisolia, disciple of the Nobel Prize winner Severo Ochoa. Presided over by the Royal House, it brings together the most prestigious scientists in the world on its juries. The prize-winners go on to form part of the Consultative Council for Research and Development of the Valencian government. The King Jaume I Prizes were created in 1989.



La Llotja (Stock Exchange) is an architectural tribute to commercial activity and finance

Palacio del Marqués de Dos Aguas



This rather unusual building, which receives innumerable visitors wishing to see, above all, its magnificent baroque façade, which alludes to the noble title of its patron Rabassa de Perellós. Sculptured in alabaster from the Picassent quarries, the scene depicts a poetic allegory on water and the river with the enigmatic presence of gigantic semi naked figures. The upper section refers to the Virgen del Rosario, whilst on the section below two rivers intertwine between fauna and some form of vegetation wrapped around two gigantic bald figures one completely naked and the other semi-naked. The figures are clearly influenced by and display admiration for the human figure as depicted by Michael Angelo.

The building was originally a gothic palace with a crenellated tower. In 1740 Ginés Rabassa entrusted its reform to the architects and artists who were popular in the city at that time: Hipólito Rovira, Ignacio Vergara and Luis Domingo. To the palaces original structure these artists added the alabaster façade, the cupola above the main staircase and the frescoes on the façade. A century later this same family refurbished the building once again to further accentuate its opulence.

The sculptured alabaster façade by Ignacio Vergara is one of the most photographed sites in the city

Two giants amongst the waters placidly display their power and strength on the palace façade

Modernist Valencia



Since the bourgeoisie and ruling classes had a penchant for the modernist movement and its architectural potential, Valencia is one of the cities with the most modernist architecture in Spain. Exuberant, ornate, colourful and geometric were just some of the modernist features which impressed Valencia's artists and architects. Modernist architecture became established in the city by appearing in large public works, city planning projects and housing. Later it also appeared in painting and sculpture.

Examples of modernist architecture include the Mercat Central and the impressive buildings in the plaza del Ayuntamiento, also the Estación del Norte and numerous accommodation blocks in the prestigious Ensanche district as well as the Mercado de Colón, a remarkable urban development. It's actually possible to make a little tour to discover modernist Valencia. Starting from the corner where calle Ruzafa meets Gran Vía Marques del Turia, there is one of the listed buildings. Next the amazing Casa Ortega, located at number 9 on Gran Vía. Casa Ferrer at 29 calle Cirilo Amorós, and Casa de los Dragones at number 3 calle Jorge Juan, all fine examples of architectural beauty.

View of Casa Ortega (1907)



Valencia at fiesta time

The passion for fire is expressed with great enthusiasm at Valencian fiestas, practically with the same voracity shared by its closest manifestation: fireworks. The New Year is welcomed by the heat of bonfires in order to be freed of bad spirits on this the day of San Antonio Abad, the Fallas ritual is totally consumed by fire and fireworks, the Moors lose their fiesta battles against the Christians with the roar of fireworks and San Juan is celebrated with bonfires on the beach.

For the people of Valencia, the fiesta is a popular, extroverted, street scenario, a parade of regional costumes, fancy dress and traditional outfits, all to be seen and admired in street processions, the fiesta being a place to encounter neighbours and visitors, each of which displays not what they are but how they would like to be and what they would like to have. The scene is permanently filled with the sound of the pasadoble and other popular music. The fiesta is understood to be a party venue and a fantasy version of the reality of everyday life.

Another part of the history behind and main element of the fiesta focuses on religion. The public festivities which take place emphasise the power of liturgy, in the knowledge of the rites which permit the most distant to be experienced through that which is closest and the most celestial through the most earthly, the religious representation transformed into a theatrical setting with celebrities, fancy dress and floats.

Valencia at fiesta time is another, somewhat animated means of getting to know this city and its people. These traditions are by no means rooted in decrees or by-laws, it is, on the contrary, the neighbourhood's will and determination which is continually expressed in the re-enactment of their festive rites.

City of Arts and Sciences

This impressive urban and leisure complex that the Generalitat Valenciana promoted as from the early 1990s endeavours to place Valencia in the European selection of cities prepared to speed up the process of modernity. When the architectural intervention took administrative shape and dimension, Valencia had been left outside the big strategic triangle produced in 1992 between Barcelona, Seville and Madrid with the holding of the Olympics, Expo 92 and Madrid European Capital of Culture. The Valencian government, in order to resolve this marginalisation, promoted the Música 92 initiative with the aim of entering into celebrations of an international nature, and at the same time give Calatrava carte blanche to design the Valencian city of the future.

Although the *Ciutat* has had the limited collaboration of other architects, the authorship of the global conception of the project and its realisation corresponds to the Valencian Santiago Calatrava, who has wanted to make clear here the big commitments to the future: science, culture and leisure, experienced in a setting marked by the abundance of water and plant life.

In order of the opening date the first building was the *L'Hemisfèric*, which opened in 1998. Its outer design imitates a massive human eye, which looks on how a lake of 24,000 square metres returns its image reflected in the water. Beneath its semi-spherical pupil is the IMAX film projection hall. The eyelids and lashes, thanks to an intelligent piece of engineering work, move opening or closing.

