

# IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME: GENESIS AND RECENT EVOLUTION OF THE CANTOBLANCO UNIVERSITY CAMPUS (MADRID)

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## THE CANTOBLANCO CAMPUS AND ITS TERRITORIAL ENVIRONMENT

The so-called *Universidades Autónomas*, which came into being towards the end of the 1960s, were the first new universities to be established in Spain since the 1920s.<sup>1</sup> They were formally created through the passing of a modern law and were meant to become the flagships of a proposed restructuring of university institutions and supposed pedagogic renewal. These changes were promoted by the then *Ministro de Educación*, Villar Palasí, who seemed willing to solve the main problems facing Spain's universities, which had largely remained stagnated in the past. But, in fact, the creation of these new universities, at the three major poles of modern Spanish development (Madrid, Barcelona and Bilbao), owed much to political considerations. This solution was largely a response to problems related with excessive concentrations of students, which supposed a permanent focus of conflict for the political authorities of that time. This also helps, at least in part, to explain the totally premeditated eccentric location of these universities. Cantoblanco, Bellaterra and Lejona are all relatively isolated locations, which are some distance from the main built up areas of their respective cities, and even from those of their respective secondary urban nuclei.

The Cantoblanco Campus of the *Universidad Autónoma de Madrid* is located fifteen kilometres to the north of the capital's centre. It was the first of a new generation of university sites and set the trend for a system of peripherally located universities, hitherto unknown in Spain. Furthermore, at least in this particular case, the lack of care with which the whole process was conducted was to condition the future evolution of the university and, until very recently, to hinder the execution of its daily functions.

Leaving aside the somewhat thorny, and much debated, question as to whether or not to integrate universities within their respective cities or whether, on the con-

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1. The *Universidades Autónomas* (created following approval of *Decreto-Ley* 5/1968 of 6th June) were, in effect, the first new universities to be created since the founding of the *Universidad de Murcia* in 1917 and the renovation of that of Laguna in 1922.

trary, to disseminate them in peripheral campuses. It soon became clear that once this model had been adopted, it would persist and things would continue to be done in a haphazard way. From the very start, the choice of location was a hasty and confused process.<sup>2</sup> Various different options were considered, but as (for strategic

FIGURE 1. 1970s: Isolation and poor integration within the surrounding area.



2. A much more detailed account of the complex, error-prone process involved in siting the university can be found in the book published over a decade ago by the geographers Josefina GÓMEZ MENDOZA, Gloria LUNA RODRIGO, Rafael MAS HERNÁNDEZ, Manuel MOLLÁ RUIZ-GÓMEZ and Ester SÁEZ POMBO: *Ghettos universitarios. El Campus de la Universidad Autónoma de Madrid*, Madrid, Ediciones de la Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 1987, particularly pp. 79-100.

reasons) it was considered essential to keep the new university away from the city's industrial belt, a northern site with services and equipment was preferred to a more proletarian southern location. Thus support grew for the Cantoblanco option, which eventually became definitive. The question was finally resolved from a helicopter in the most improvised of fashions. Little importance was given to the need to first impose this solution upon a swarm of small property holders, which led to a slow, complex battle for expropriation which dragged on until the end of the 1980s, nor to the fact that the university was to be located in a hollow which only offered views to the east. These inconveniences were also exacerbated by the fact that the area chosen was isolated and lacked urbanisation; factors which greatly hindered accessibility and contacts with the main city (fig. 1).

Thus the *Autónoma* became part of the *corredor Colmenar*, a linear grouping of educational, health care and service facilities. Paradoxically, although the development followed the line of the original planning strategy, it did so without even taking advantage of existing opportunities to connect up with other contemporary urban development projects, such as the new town of Tres Cantos, situated only 5 km away.

The result was that the *Universidad Autónoma de Madrid*, which like many university campuses in countries of the English-speaking world was finally set up on the outskirts of the urban nucleus. Even so, it was left devoid of any of the features that tend to characterise university cities elsewhere. It could not even boast the desired integration of educational, residential and service functions that would have allowed it to be practically self-sufficient and would have reduced the need for internal displacements to the minimum.

However, in spite of the initial difficulties, it must be recognised that today the Cantoblanco Campus finds itself located in the midst of a privileged natural environment (surrounded as it is by well-conserved and densely populated woods and the hills of El Pardo, Viñuelas and Valdelatas). Also, thanks to communications developments, its relations have progressively improved both with its immediate urban environment (Alcobendas, San Sebastián de los Reyes and Tres Cantos) and with the city of Madrid and its latest residential developments (fig. 2).

Although its initial infrastructures and transport provisions were insufficient, even after the construction of the *Autovía de Colmenar Viejo*<sup>3</sup> (a few years later) and the prolongation of the railway network to reach the university facilities, there are now (except in the "rush hour") several alternative ways to reach the *Autónoma* relatively rapidly and comfortably. The great volume of traffic that travels to the university is channelled along two main road axes: the *Autovía de Colmenar Viejo* (M-607), which has direct connections with the M-30, the M-40, and the *Castellana y Herrera Oria*;

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3. Colmenar Viejo dual carriageway.



and the *Autovía de Alcobendas* (M-616). The nearest metro stations (Pitis, Herrera Oria and Fuencarral) still unfortunately remain quite distant from the campus. Even so, there are other public transport solutions, in the form of four intra-urban bus routes, which offer frequent and numerous services (that are complemented by nine

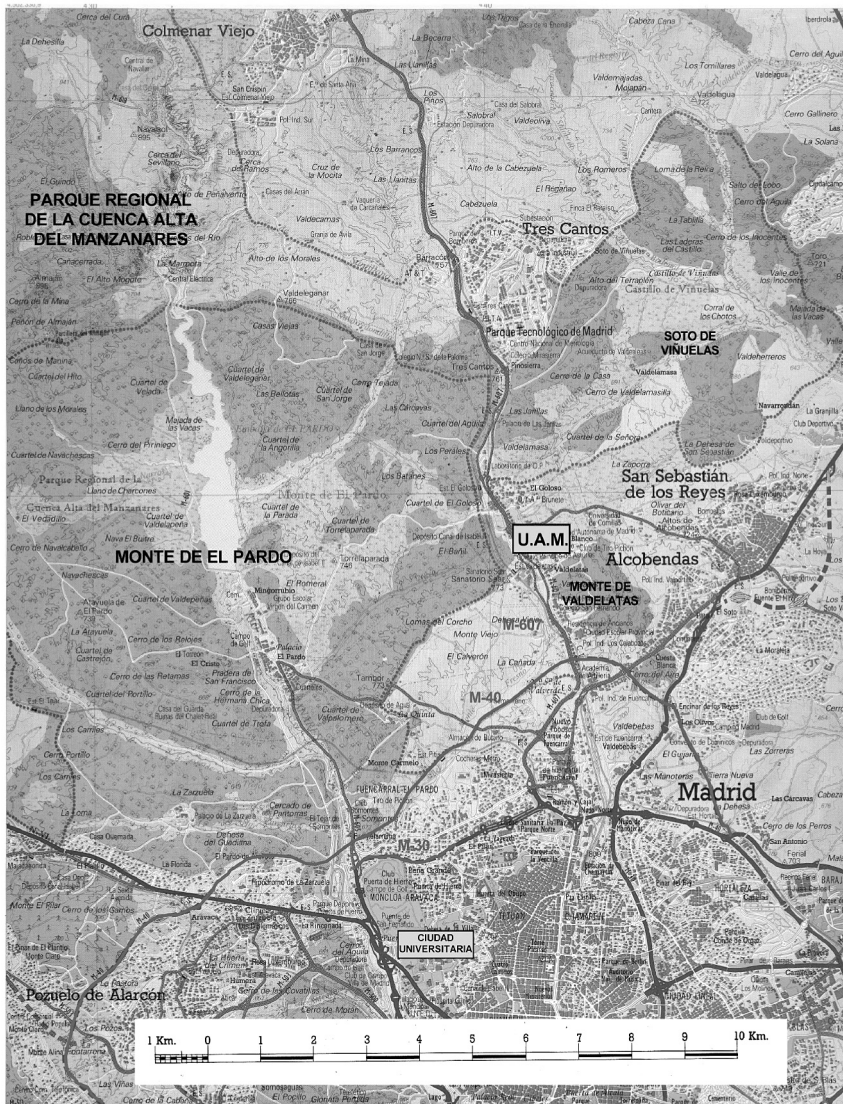


FIGURE 2. Today: Closer to the city as a result of urban expansion and improvements in communications.

FIGURE 3: *Original faculty building, dating from the 1970s.*

others with bus-stops in the vicinity of the university premises) and two local train services.<sup>4</sup>

Although the present situation still leaves much room for improvement, there can be no doubt that relations and exchanges between the university and its immediate urban environment have been reinforced. This is illustrated by the growing number of students and teachers who live in the surrounding area and also by various agreements and collaborations established between the university and local companies for carrying out research projects.

#### URBANISTIC EVOLUTION AND LAND USES ON THE CANTOBLANCO CAMPUS

Having examined the genesis of the Cantoblanco campus and seen how its relations with its surrounding area have been transformed, we shall make a succinct

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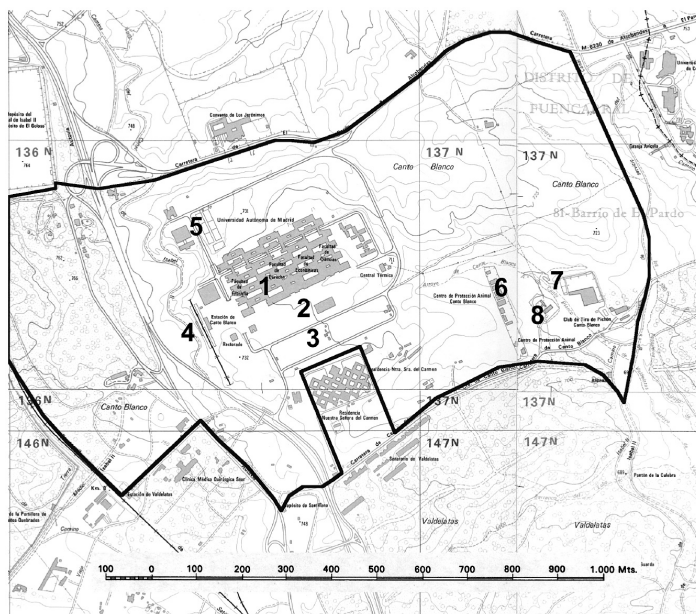
4. The bus lines that run directly to the university campus are the 714 (Plaza Castilla-UAM), the 715 (UAM-Universidad de Comillas), the 827 (Canillejas-Alcobendas-UAM-Tres Cantos) and the 827A (San Sebastián de los Reyes-Alcobendas-UAM), with services at intervals of between 10 and 20 minutes. As far as local train services are concerned, apart from lines C-1 (Alcalá de Henares-Tres Cantos) and C7b (Príncipe Pío-Tres Cantos), with services every 15 minutes at peak hours and every 30 minutes off peak, work is now in progress to prolong line C-1 as far as Colmenar Viejo and for the construction of a branch line from Cantoblanco to the dormitory cities of Alcobendas and San Sebastián de los Reyes.

analysis of its internal evolution, placing special emphasis on urbanistic considerations and land uses.<sup>5</sup>

Generally speaking, the urbanistic evolution of the *Autónoma* can be divided into three different periods. The first phase corresponded to the 1971 premises, which resulted from modifications made by the *Ministerio de Educación* to the draft project (the work of the Borobio family) which was designed to accommodate around 12,000 students and won an international design competition. Thanks to an enormous budgetary commitment, in little over a year, three of the largest construction companies of the time (Entrecanales y Tavora, Dragados y Construcciones, and Huarte y Compania) rapidly constructed a great rectangular mega-building made of around 95,000 m<sup>2</sup> of reinforced concrete. This building was to house the university faculties

FIGURE 4. 1980s: *Minimal urbanisation and continuity of uses unconnected with the university.*

1. Faculties 2. Green belt 3. Parking places 4. RENFE (railway station) 5. Sports hall 6. Municipal dogs' home 7. Shooting Club 8. Building/area ceded free of charge on a provisional basis.



5. Apart from the previously cited book by Josefina GÓMEZ MENDOZA et al. (1987, pp. 120-128 and 175-185), further useful information concerning these questions is presented in articles by Ángel URRUTIA NUÑEZ, lecturer in *Historia del Arte*: “La arquitectura de la Universidad de Cantoblanco (Madrid)”, *Boletín del Museo e Instituto Camón Aznar*, vol. XXVII, 1987, pp. 67-89 and “La nueva arquitectura de la Universidad Autónoma en Cantoblanco (Madrid)”, *Anuario del Departamento de Historia y Teoría del Arte*, N. 2, 1990, pp. 229-245. Due to the limited space available, we have had to omit a series of other very interesting questions such as those dealt with in the doctoral works presented last year by Ana Pilar GONZÁLEZ ALONSO, Araceli HUERTA BARAJAS, M<sup>a</sup> José LOZANO DE SAN CLETO and Daniel MARÍAS MARTÍNEZ: *Uso de equipamientos y servicios, estructura funcional y calidad ambiental en el Campus de la Universidad Autónoma de Madrid*.



(Philosophy, Law, Economics and Sciences, photograph 1) and also offered separate offices and areas for the *Rectorado*,<sup>6</sup> the *Instituto de Ciencias de la Educación*<sup>7</sup> and complementary services (Central Library, Dining hall, and Sports Centre). During this period, and until well into the following decade, the *Autónoma* —far from being a model of an integrated campus— was a poorly urbanised area, which was cut off from the surrounding uncultivated land by a neighbouring highway. It had no other uses than those related with education; in short, it was devoid of “urban life” (fig. 3). As if that were little, it was not long before the gross insufficiencies of its infrastructure and the precariousness of its facilities began to manifest themselves.<sup>8</sup>

FIGURE 5. *The new Law Faculty in the southern ensanche.*



The second phase began in the 1980s, when the UAM finally took full possession of the campus. With a view to attending to a series of new demands and necessities, the *Equipo Ferrán* projected three *ensanches*<sup>9</sup> (two adjacent to one another in the south, for various CSIC Institutes and new faculties, and another in the north, for new

6. Vice-chancellor's office.

7. Teacher Training Institute.

8. This was immediately evident in the deterioration of the open-air parking facilities and the appearance of cracks in buildings, but the most lamentable occurrence of all was subsidence in the lobby of the *Facultad de Filosofía y Letras* at the end of September 1976, which caused important personal injuries and material damage.

9. Wide avenues.

sports facilities) that were not completed until the mid-1990s. The new constructions that were added to the system of central boulevards were, at least in principle, functionally appropriate. However, they did not constitute a homogenous block and clearly contrasted in both quality and design with the prefabricated greyish appearance of the part of the *Autónoma* that had been built in the 1970s (photograph 2).

FIGURE 6. *Aerial view of the campus in 1999. Explanation of lay out and construction of new buildings in the north-east sector of the grounds, which also incorporates previously unknown uses (residential and commercial).*



The third and final phase, comprising current and future developments, is being put into effect in the north-east sector of the premises (where landscaping and the construction of new buildings have already begun, fig. 4), following guidelines laid down within the *Plan Especial* which was drawn up by the *Equipo Bardají*.<sup>10</sup> The Plan foresees an important extension of the existing university that —for better or worse— would have important repercussions for the university complex's future. It is based around two perpendicular axes (one longitudinal, established as a continuation of the central area currently used as parking space, and the other traversal, connecting the northern and southern accesses) closed in a ring structure. It is characterised by a mixture of uses and functions, and by the permeability of the different spaces that constitute it: new faculty buildings, research centres, student housing and buildings and space turned over to complementary activities (such as sports areas, gardens, commercial

10. It remains somewhat surprising that the mentioned *Plan Especial* developed from of an initiative begun by the now defunct housing co-operative PSV. See the study directed by Enrique BARDAJÍ ÁLVAREZ: *Plan Especial SG-1 de la Universidad Autónoma de Canto Blanco*, Madrid, Social Housing Promotion (PSV), February 1992 (approved 22-7-1993).



centres and auditoriums). With these proposals —that take into consideration the demands of the university's users— it is sought to break away from the image of the *Ghetto universitario*, and to provide the university with those characteristically urban elements that were initially denied to it when it was first established.

#### FINAL REFLECTIONS AND PROPOSALS FOR THE FUTURE

Almost 30 years have passed since the Cantoblanco campus was built, and during this time almost all aspects of its day to day life, have undergone profound changes, including its educational context. This period has, amongst other changes, seen the transition from Francoism to democracy, the passing of the *Ley de Reforma Universitaria* of 1983, the proliferation of private universities, the transfer of administrative functions to the Autonomous Communities and the appearance of new degree courses. The university itself has also been transformed, both internally and with respect to its relations with the outside world.<sup>11</sup> Much has changed over the last three decades, and during this time the *Autónoma de Madrid*, which is a medium-sized university by Spanish standards (with 30,000 students, 1,600 teaching staff and 800 non-teaching staff in the academic year 1998-1999 and a budget of 21,000 million pesetas)<sup>12</sup> has gradually gained academic prestige for both its teaching and research, not only in Spain, but also in Europe. This is therefore a suitable moment at which to put the physical reality of the campus on the same level as other aspects of the institution.

Thinking along these lines, it seems opportune to remember some of the main ideas that have been considered in the course of this document and, having carefully considered them, to select a series of lines of action that will allow us to reach our final goals.

The university was created for reasons that were more political than educational in nature and owed much to a desire to maintain public order. The university initially neither created nor formed part of the city, nor was it connected with the any of the new residential developments of its time. Yet despite these circumstances, it was not created as a *Ciudad Universitaria* with even the most minimal degree of "autonomy", but rather formed a completely isolated mass of buildings dedicated to educational uses. Only time, the unrestrained growth of Madrid, the appearance of new housing estates and the development of associated transport infrastructures have been able

11. A recent exhibition to commemorate this anniversary, supervised by the historian Manuel Pérez Ledesma, placed considerable emphasis upon these mutations. See: *Tres décadas de vida universitaria*. Catálogo de la exposición "Autonomía, treinta años", Cantoblanco, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 1999.

12. Data taken from the Vicerrectorado de Coordinación: *Guía de la Universidad. Curso académico 1999-2000*, Cantoblanco, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 1999, pp. 33-38 and 42-43.

to connect and partially integrate the university with the socio-economic reality of its territorial environment.

Due to the basic characteristics of the university premises, such as the relative absence of non-educationally related facilities and there being little more than classrooms and research centres at the university site, campus life is effectively limited to the class timetable and to the possibilities available to its users for studying and doing research there. This deficit in the provision of urban facilities has been somewhat offset by large amounts of investment, but certain problems remain unresolved, whether due to a lack of will, lack of means, or because things have not been done correctly. From an urbanistic perspective, the passing of time has seen the university's centre of gravity gradually move towards the south and east of the campus. Even so, it should not be forgotten that most of the university community —two thirds of it, to be precise— is still concentrated around the original nucleus that was built in the 1970s. It is precisely there that the greatest problems are to be found: sub-standard construction; the inappropriate orientation of buildings resulting in unequal exposure to the sun; infra-utilised interior spaces; a proliferation of stairways that noticeably hinder the transport of materials and restrict access for disabled people, etc.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the campus as a whole lacks any personal sign of identity. This is because it is the result of various different interventions which were carried out without any form of general co-ordination and at different points in time. As a result, on the same premises, it is possible to find university and research facilities that have very different architectural characteristics. These exist alongside other older uses that still continue to exist on the periphery of the premises, despite the fact that they have no connection at all with the university or university life.<sup>14</sup>

To be fair and taking everything into account, there are some infrastructures and services that do facilitate campus life; schools (nursery, primary and secondary schools), an ever wider offer of sports and cultural facilities for complementary leisure activity, and some basic service facilities (bookshop, tobacconist's, bank, travel agency, etc.). These mainly help to serve day to day needs and, along with the housing that will soon be built on campus in order to accommodate students and visiting teaching staff, will help to achieve a further approximation to the initial concept of a *Ciudad Universitaria*.

Although the results of accumulated errors still remain more noticeable than the efforts made to remedy them, a point has now been reached at which the problems of the past have largely been mitigated. Even so, at the same time, other problems

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13. Although this is patently obvious, Geography students studying doctoral courses under the supervision of Ana Olivera Poll have undertaken the task of corroborating the fact that the majority of buildings on the campus clearly fail to comply with *Ley* 8/1993, 22nd June, which refers to improving accessibility and suppressing architectonic barriers.

14. To be precise, these uses are a Shooting Club, a Centre for the Protection of Animals and a sub-station belonging to Hidroeléctrica Española.

FIGURE 7. *Landscaped gardens opposite the faculties.*FIGURE 8. *Intensely occupied "beach" parking.*

have emerged that are inherent to the new realities of the location and the university. It is our desire for the campus on which we carry out our professional activity to continue improving and for this to happen, we feel the necessity to make a few modest final reflections that we would like to serve as proposals for new interventions in the immediate future.



On one hand, it would seem opportune to take advantage of open spaces of great natural and landscape value in the university's immediate vicinity and to seek greater integration between the campus and its surroundings. In order to achieve this, it will be necessary to adopt appropriate measures for the campus's border fringes whose current lamentable state (including abandoned areas and waste dumps) contrasts sharply with the green spaces of its interior, which are dear to the university students though expensive to maintain (photograph 3).

On the other hand, the UAM has become a place where private transport is used to excess (photograph 4). Private cars are used not only to get to the university, but also increasingly to move around within its grounds. This practice causes a series of environmental problems and of coexistence with pedestrian traffic: the answer could be to restrict this road traffic and to encourage people to walk from place to place.<sup>15</sup>

To close this discussion, it is necessary to define a coherent model for urbanisation that will appropriately attend —as far as possible— to the university's real and future needs and rectify current problems such as the complex's deficiencies in internal communications and the heterogeneity of its buildings.

The road to definitively transforming the current campus into a true *Ciudad Universitaria* seems to have been started, there is —however— still a long way to go.

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15. For many years now there have been several interesting proposals to deal with this problem that have unfortunately never completely materialised. One example is that suggested by Alfonso SANZ: *Accesibilidad y medio ambiente en el Campus de Cantoblanco. Problemas y soluciones para el tráfico y el transporte*, Cantoblanco, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid-Vicerrectorado de Alumnos y Medio Ambiente, December 1996.

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