



**Francisco Antonio García Pérez\***

*Buildings, archetypes and cosmogonies  
on the edge of the contemporary city*

*Budynki, archetypy i kosmogonia  
na obrzeżu współczesnego miasta*

*Introduction*

In the shape maelstrom of the contemporary city there are works of architecture that manifest themselves as interstices opened to the past that illuminate millenary discourses originated in the depths of time. Like the one that began its journey when the first stone was erected in order to locate man in the cosmos, giving shape to the abstract space.

One of these revealing architectures is located on the outskirts of the city of Granada, in Spain: the architectural complex formed by the buildings of the Caja Granada Bank Headquarters – popularly known as The Cube because of its parallelepiped shape – and The Andalusia’s Museum of Memory, both designed by the architect Alberto Campo Baeza<sup>1</sup>. It is defended that in spite of the multiple interpretations that can be made of this architectural complex, underneath all of them lie a series of symbolisms analogous to those established in the archaic urban foundational act. An assumption that is confirmed by the shapes of the buildings designed, as they are erected through images that refer to the idea of an archaic symbolic Centre, which, materialised architecturally in the temple, was built with the vocation of giving shape to the space where it was located – to make *cosmos* from it – following a previous model, transferring memory.

*Shaping nothingness*

The founding act developed in the contemporary Granada took place in an open space located between the city’s built boundary and the ring road, in the vicinity of *la Vega*, the traditional agricultural land of Granada. A *terrain vague* in which the Campo Baeza architectural complex is inserted with the vocation of creating urban identity, with the intention of transferring the density of the consolidated city to the outskirts yet to be articulated (Fig. 1, 2).

In ancient times the construction of the Centre was the primary instrument of *cosmization*. Through its establishment, the virtuality of the space in which man was situated was transformed into a definite and real form. The prototype of the Centre was the Sacred Mountain, the place where Creation began: the elevation that descended from the celestial plane, reached the earth’s surface and sunk its roots in the underworld. By means of the rupture of cosmic planes that it established, the mountain was considered the Axis of the World, the *Axis Mundi*<sup>2</sup>. When the archaic man *cosmized* the world, he did so taking as a reference the archetype of the Sacred Mountain; the temple, the germ of the city, was built with the will to be a repetition of the Sacred Mountain, and according to it became

\* ORCID: 0000-0002-7312-4990. Higher Technical School of Architecture in Granada, University of Granada (Spain).

<sup>1</sup> The two buildings have been published several times. The author of the works makes a broad description of them on his website [1].

<sup>2</sup> In Hindu beliefs Mount Meru rises at the centre of the world. So did El-burz mountain in Iran, or Mount Tabor in Palestine. For the Christians, Golgotha was in the centre of the world, as it was the top of the Cosmic Mountain and at the same time the place where Adam was created and buried [2, pp. 12–14].

the Centre, the *Axis Mundi*: the meeting place of the inhabited earth with heaven and hell. Thanks to the rupture between the profane and sacred planes that every temple established, the door, the threshold, acquired transcendental importance. It became the device of passage in which all the intensity of the cosmic rupture was focused.

The new temples of the Granada periphery referred to, dedicated to money and culture, are erected by means of rotund images that refer to the great stone masses of the sacred mountains and to the sacred doors that delimited the sacred from the profane. The Cube is proposed as a large volume made with a  $3 \times 3 \times 3$  m reinforced concrete grid,



Fig. 1. The Andalusia's Museum of Memory and The Cube (Caja Granada Bank Headquarters) in the urban periphery of Granada (photo by F.A. García Pérez, 2016)

Il. 1. Muzeum Pamięci Andaluzji i The Cube (siedziba główna banku Caja Granada) na peryferiach Granady (fot. F.A. García Pérez, 2016)



Fig. 2. Construction process of the architectural complex. Photomontage (by F.A. García Pérez, 2019; source: Consejería de Medio Ambiente y Ordenación del Territorio de la Junta de Andalucía, 1984–2009)

Il. 2. Proces budowy kompleksu urbanistycznego. Fotomontaż (F.A. García Pérez, 2019; źródło: Consejería de Medio Ambiente y Ordenación del Territorio de la Junta de Andalucía, 1984–2009)



Fig. 3. Architectural complex (Cube & Museum, in the foreground)  
(photo by F.A. García Pérez, 2016)

Il. 3. Kompleks architektoniczny (Cube & Museum, na pierwszym planie)  
(fot. F.A. García Pérez, 2016)



Fig. 4. Overall view of the architectural complex (Cube & Museum, in the foreground) (photo by F.A. García Pérez, 2016)

Il. 4. Widok ogólny kompleksu architektonicznego (Cube & Museum, na pierwszym planie) (fot. F.A. García Pérez, 2016)

which emerges on a large base. The geometric rotundity of the architectural piece gives it an imposing presence on the plain on which it sits, recalling in its abstraction the platonic volumes of the archaic builders, those that, like the ziggurat or the pyramid, rose towards the sky with the vocation of being bridges between the celestial and the human. Eight years later, in 2009, the Museum was built as a prolongation of The Cube: a building proposed as an extension of the podium on which The Cube sits and the virtual translation of one of its facades, which is shaped on a thin wall of concrete with a height and width exactly the same as The Cube building. This new facade is the entrance to the Museum and, by virtue of the shape continuity described, the figurative access to the whole complex. Thanks to its abstract rotundity, it becomes a threshold of symbolic dimensions, the device that guarantees the separation and, therefore, the existence of the symbolically unformed spaces and the cosmos established by the temple (Fig. 3, 4).

Although it is reasonably objectionable that the qualities described are not exclusive to the buildings studied, the analogy established with the archaic symbolic Centres is confirmed for the following reason: like those, these new temples contain in their interior the emptiness that they precisely displace with their erection. The rotundity of the architectures of The Cube and the Museum eliminate with their presence the lack of definition – the absence of form – of the space where they were erected and it is precisely this absence what fills the interior of their volumes. In the heart of the buildings we find symbolism that refer to the subterranean and aquatic, archaic images of the *unformed*.

### *Hollow bodies*

The cosmogonic myth, that relates in archaic societies the origin of the world, was a means by which man explained to himself his vital environment: the irrationality of natural phenomena and the mystery of unfounded spaces. Through its codification in the form of myth – its

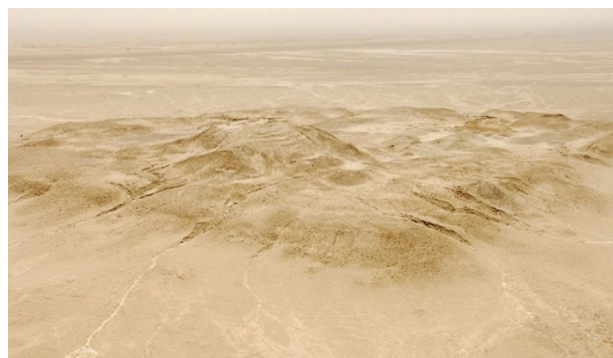


Fig. 5. The Eridu site and the ziggurat  
(photo: SAC Andy Holmes, 2008. MCD Crown Copyright)

Il. 5. Eridu i zikkurat  
(zdjęcie: SAC Andy Holmes, 2008. MCD Crown Copyright)

representation by means of the symbol – the human environment became cognoscible and, therefore, controllable. Thus, for example, in the *Enûma Elish*<sup>3</sup>, the mythological story that narrates the origin of the Mesopotamian world, there is a symbolisation of the landscape surrounding Eridú, the first city according to Sumerian tradition. Eridú was physically located on a mound surrounded by a lake that, depending on the time, dried up, turning its bed into an empty plain (Fig. 5). The lake was personified in *Abzu*<sup>4</sup>, the God of Fresh Waters, who, at a given time, is sacrificed by other lesser gods and buried in the bowels of the earth, under the city. The incomprehensibility of the disappearance of the waters was thus eradicated through this symbolic narration. In this poem, the *unshaped*, for the first time, is symbolized in aquatic and subterranean

<sup>3</sup> The full text, in *Enuma Elish: The Seven Tablets of the History of Creation* [3].

<sup>4</sup> Sumerian term composed of *ab*: ocean and *zu* = “to know” or “deep”.

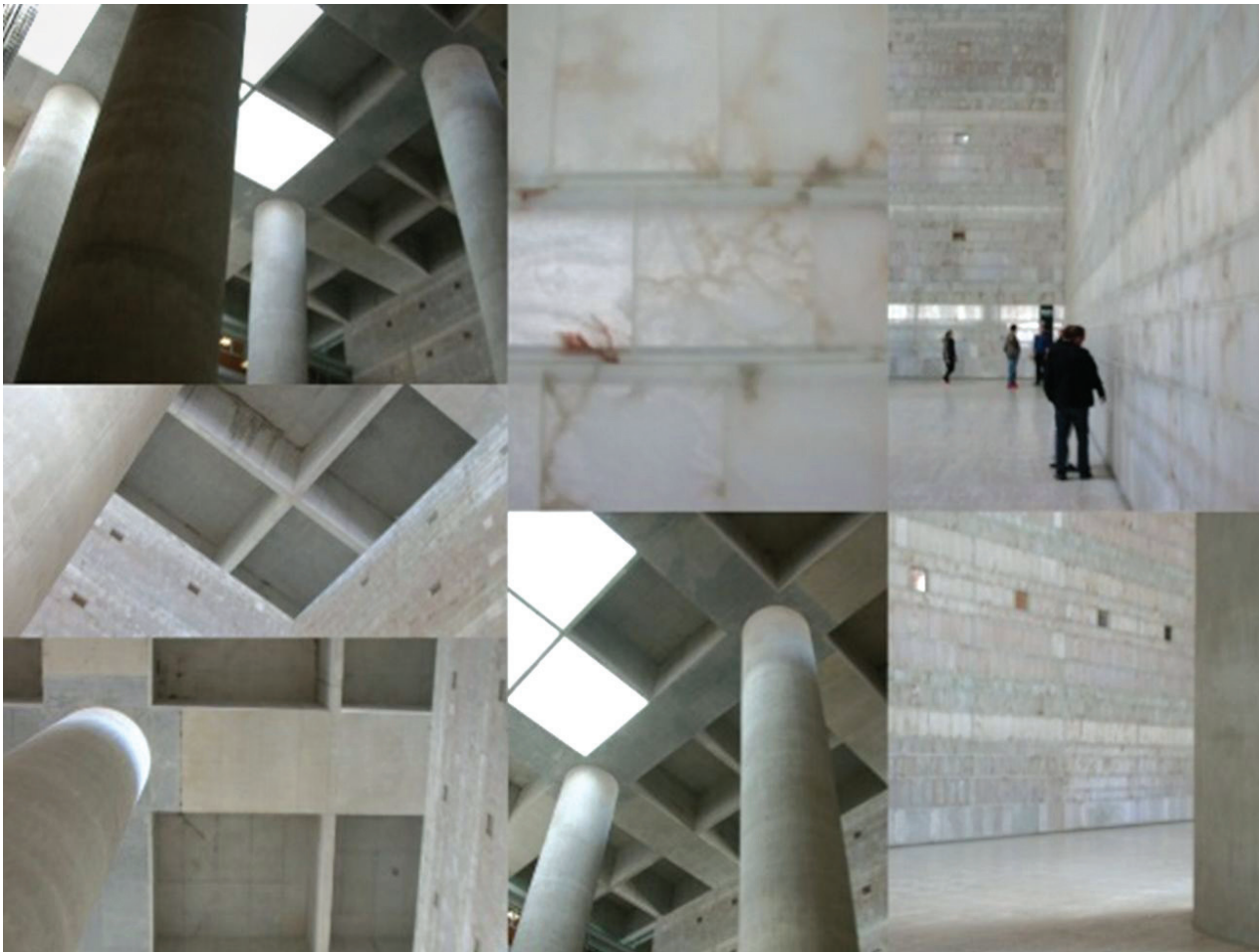


Fig. 6. Different views of The Cube interior courtyard (photo by F.A. García Pérez, 2019)

Il. 6. Różne widoki wewnętrznego dziedzińca Cube (fot. F.A. García Pérez, 2019)

images<sup>5</sup>; symbols that will reappear recurrently in the urban foundational rituals of most cultures. In the Etruscan and Roman tradition, the definitive design of the city was guaranteed through the prior establishment of two fundamental elements: the wall – which defined an interior space isolated from the mutability and aggressiveness of the exterior spaces, symbolically aquatic – and the *mundus*, a hole made in the ground within the walls, on which the symbolic temple was built and which guaranteed that this temple was the Centre of the World, by connecting it to the underworld. In the Hebrew tradition, this connection between the aquatic and the subterranean is repeated. The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem contains in its interior the primordial, indefinite spaces that it symbolically eradicated with its presence: the Rock functioned as a door, limiting – and therefore making possible – the encounter between the human sphere and the primordial ocean, the Tehôm, which extends beneath it in the subsoil.

When archaic man performed the exorcism of founding the unfounded, everything that *had no name* yet slipped

into the heart of matter. And in this inner and undifferentiated space it has remained, then manifested itself recurrently in the acts that make the primeval is expressed. Many centuries later, the aquatic and subterranean, fused into a single mask that symbolizes that which *has no face*, is present into the foundational shapes of The Cube and the Museum. The manifest stony image of the fronts built in alabaster and the verticality of the light that passes through the large skylights opened to the majestic interior of The Cube, refer to a cavernous space, to an open void in the bosom of matter (Fig. 6). Described by the architect as a “cistern of light”, this cubic void maintains a clear shape coincidence with the painting entitled *El agua oculta* or *El navegante interior* [*The Hidden Water* or *The Inner Navigator*] created by Guillermo Pérez Villalta in 1990. The painting represents an enigmatic boatman who sails through a space of marked interiority, flooded by dark waters. Campo Baeza has expressed on numerous occasions the pleasant surprise he was given, once the building had been executed, by finding this work and recognising in it evident shape parallels with the projected spaces. The painter declared that the theme of the painting was originated in the effort to unite in a single image the architectural essence of the city of Granada and the metaphorical space of thought. The architect creates a volume in which

<sup>5</sup> A detailed description of the relation between Eridu’s real landscape and the symbolic images that encode it is made in *Mesopotamia: The Invention of the City* [4].



Fig. 7. View of the half-buried courtyard of the Andalusia's Museum of Memory and its double helicoidal ramp (photo by F.A. García Pérez, 2019)

Il. 7. Widok w połowie ukrytego dziedzińca Muzeum Pamięci Andaluzji i jego podwójna rampa helikoidalna (fot. F.A. García Pérez, 2019)

he attempts to synthesise the intimate dimension of light in Granada's architecture. In their work, both artists resort to the symbolic image of the internal, pregnant by the mutable: in painting, an aquatic room; in architecture, an interior space that transmutes its "spatiality" with the variation of the light throughout the day and seasons. The evident shape coincidence of the imagined spaces seems to be located beyond the authors' taste or personal concerns, but to be linked to an ancestral memory of collective dimension that surpasses them. In the attempt to manifest the primordial, these two shape manifestations are configured as symbolic Centres: the vertical rays of light put in communion the celestial plane with the subterranean, where the emptiness of the mutable resides.

The main body of the Museum is configured as a half-buried horizontal volume that opens its spaces into the interior. Specifically, towards the courtyard located in the geometric centre of the building, where a double helical ramp serves as an element of internal communication between the different exhibition halls (Fig. 7). This type of ramp is a structure that since ancient times has symbolised the regression-regeneration that defines the passage through the archetype of the labyrinth<sup>6</sup>: a spatial device that refers to the cavernous, to the deep, to the mystery that resides in the darkness of matter.

The original focus of the architect was to make a single continuous ramp, of descent and ascent, which was developed in a single stretch without changing its vertical projection. An idea impossible to materialize in the physical reality, but possible in the symbolic narration. In *The Divine Comedy* (1304–1321), Dante and Virgil change the direction of their continuous journey – from descent to ascent – sliding through the virtuality of Satan's body, which

<sup>6</sup> Further information about the symbolism inherent in the double helical ramp, in *The mystic spiral. Journey of the soul* [5].



Fig. 8. Botticelli's Lucifer from *Inferno* (XXXIV) (*Divine Comedy* illustrated by Botticelli, 1481). The drawing shows Lucifer's geographical position in Hell (source: Wikipedia, public domain)

Il. 8. Lucyfer Botticellego z *Piekła* (XXXIV) (*Boska komedia* ilustrowana przez Botticellego). Rysunek przedstawia geograficzną pozycję Lucyfera w piekle (Wikipedia, domena publiczna)

is located deep inside (Fig. 8). It is noteworthy that the architectural transcription of the route carried out in *The Divine Comedy* – objectified in Giuseppe Terragni's *Danteum* (1942) – indicates, as in the Museum, that the change of direction made possible by Lucifer's virtuality cannot be physically translated: in the Terragni building, this virtual passage takes the form of an everyday transit space, equivalent to the floor of the Museum's courtyard, which guarantees the physical connection between the two sections of the ramp<sup>7</sup>. By establishing an analogy between Lucifer's body and the floor of the courtyard, the latter would share with the former the condition of emptiness that makes it possible to change direction – from bottom to top – without interrupting the journey. Symbolically speaking, the aquatic and unshaped condition of the courtyard plane is reinforced if we bear in mind that the ramps of the Museum were inspired by the two ramps for penguins designed in 1934 by Berthold Lubetkin for the London Zoo. In the

<sup>7</sup> A detailed study of *Danteum* as a physical transcription of Dante's narrative is developed in *Peso y levedad. Notas sobre la gravedad a partir del Danteum* [6].

case of London, the ramps communicate with each other by means of a plane that is literally water.

If the ramps are symbolically considered therefore the floor of the courtyard acquires a numinous meaning that refers to what is deepest, underground. The Museum building, by virtue of the rupture of cosmic planes established by the courtyard open to the sky, manifests itself once again as the reworking of the archaic *Axis Mundi*<sup>8</sup>.

### *Transferring memory*

The Cube and the Museum were involved in the exorcism of the indefinite spaces of the urban periphery, although it was not done by exhuming the memory that is contained in every open space – rescuing the agricultural, urban or natural vestiges that it could contain – but by extrapolating external memory to it. The open space was considered a *tabula rasa*, a *liminal* space, and was founded in an archaic manner, following a previous, paradigmatic model.

The concept of *liminal* space comes from the research on the rites of passage carried out at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Aldo van Gennep and, from there, his disciple Víctor Turner sixty years later<sup>9</sup>. *Liminality* is a notion that alludes to the intermediate state in which the subject who intends to pass from one social status to another within a specific social structure is forced to remain for a period of time, and in which he is forced to get rid of all the ties that link him to his previous life, to once released, to be born again establishing new links with the community. *Liminality* that, assuming the analogy between the structure of the anthropological ritual of passage and that of the material ritual of passage, is identified with the intermediate state, defined by the abolition of form, through which all spatial refoundation passes in its regeneration process. A phase characterized by indeterminacy, which is, in essence, pure power, pure possibility. From the study of the two paradigmatic archetypes of material passage, the flood myth and the labyrinth, it is obtained that this *liminal* state is symbolized with water and with the indeterminacy of the internal – the subterranean – respectively<sup>10</sup>. That is, with the two symbolisms that are present in the rituals of archaic urban foundation.

Both the flood myth and the labyrinth are two archetypes that indicate spatial renewal. Both are structured in very specific successive temporal phases: the previous state that degenerates until it becomes *liminal*, the *liminal* state itself and, finally, the regenerated state. The flood, equivalent to baptism, entails the immersion of the earth – from the previous cosmos, aged or sinful – in an in-

termediate, neutral state, characterised by the abolition of shapes and, by virtue of this impasse, its final regeneration. The labyrinth is an image of man's journey towards death and rebirth. A journey that involves two phases: the journey to the centre and the return of the centre. It can be said that the initiatory journey to the depths involves a metaphorical spatial regeneration: the outside world that forces the hero to enter the interior of matter in search of answers, sees its nature regenerated by virtue of the discovery produced in the depths<sup>11</sup> (Fig. 9).

The analysis of these two archetypes of material passage evidence that spatial regeneration can only be achieved through the intervention of a tool that, coming from the original state, is capable of passing through the total dissolution of the form – the flood or the centre of the labyrinth – without degrading itself. In the anthropological rites of passage the tool is the body of the subject itself. In the two archetypes of material passage, they are both, the Ark and the Ariadne's thread; that is, devices that act as memory conductors: umbilical cords that link the previous cosmos with the renewed one<sup>12</sup>.

Alberto Campo Baeza uses a transfer of memory in order to give immediate identity to the edge space where his architectures are built. As the architect explains, there is a parallelism between the dimensions of The Cube building and those of the Granada cathedral: both the height of the inner void and the diameter of its pillars coincide exactly with the dimensions of the main nave and the cathedral columns. Once again, the finding of this coincidence took place once the project was finished. In the design of The Cube, therefore, the shapes of the cathedral were not consciously taken as a previous reference. However, years later and in a totally intentional manner, the architect decided to dimension the courtyard of the Museum by transferring exactly to it the largest and smallest diameters of the courtyard of the Palace of Charles V, the imperial residence built in 1526 in the heart of the Islamic palace of The Alhambra (Fig. 10).

By means this strategy, intuitive or perfectly programmed, a transfer of foundational shapes is made from the historic city to the outskirts. The Cathedral and the Palace of Charles V were erected as symbols of the new religious and political power, respectively, in the recently conquered city. These inaugural forms of Christianity established order in the supposedly disarticulated and chaotic Arab city, imposing themselves on it with the freedom granted by the fact that they were conceived as symbolic Centres – in this sense, it is enough to comment on the

<sup>8</sup> Flavius Josephus wrote that the court represented the sea (i.e., the lower regions), the Holy Place represented earth, and the Holy of Holies heaven [7, p. 43].

<sup>9</sup> The main texts are Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* [8]; Turner, *The Ritual Process. Structure and Antistructure* [9].

<sup>10</sup> On the vast bibliography of the symbolism of the Deluge and the labyrinth, we will only cite two emblematic works: Eliade, *History of Religious Ideas*. Volume 1: *From the Stone Age to the Eleusinian Mysteries* [10]. Specifically, about the idea of labyrinth, Santarcangeli, *Il libro dei labirinti. Storia di un mito e di un simbolo* [11].

<sup>11</sup> The journey to the underworld has been a recurring theme in universal literature, from the trilogy formed by *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid* and *The Divine Comedy* to the present day. From the kidnapping of Persephone to the underworld, or the descent of Orpheus to the Infernos, to *The Immortal* or the *House of Asterion* by Jorge Luis Borges, passing through the book of *The Thousand and One Nights*, the romantic novel, or the productions of Jules Verne, Edgar Allan Poe, Franz Kafka, H.P. Lovecraft.

<sup>12</sup> In the foundational tradition of the Etruscans we find a ritual that makes direct allusion to this memorial transfer: when the *mundus* was excavated, the founders threw into it a handful of earth brought from their cities of origin. This act contributed to exorcising the *liminality* of the territory by sowing seeds in it from a previous urban shape.

Fig. 9. Athanasius Kircher's Cretan Labyrinth (in *Turris Babel*, 1679) and Genesis Flood (in *Arca Noë*, 1675) (source: Wikipedia, public domain)

Il. 9. Athanasiusa Kirchera labirynt kretański (z *Wieży Babel*, 1679) i Potop z *Księgi Rodzaju* (z *Arki Noego*, 1675) (źródło: Wikipedia, domena publiczna)

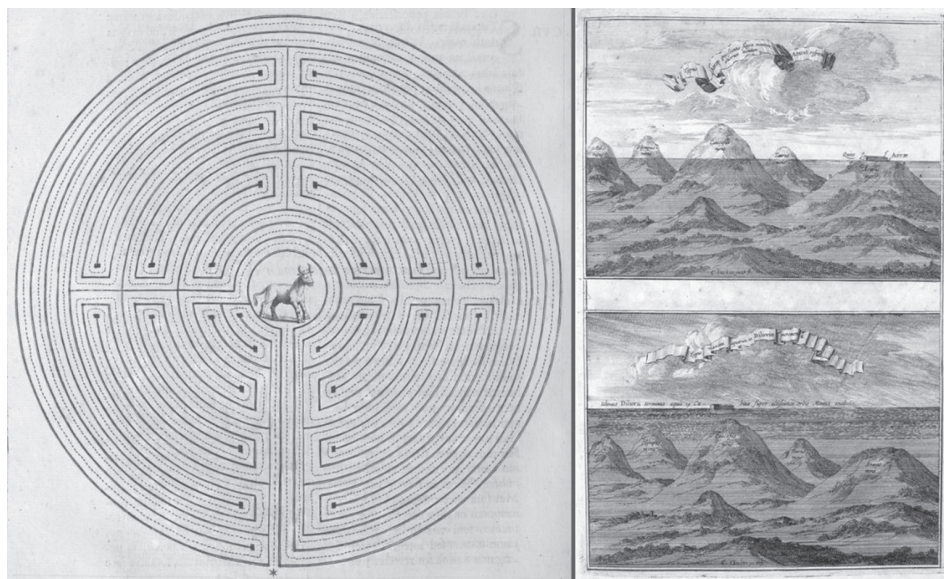
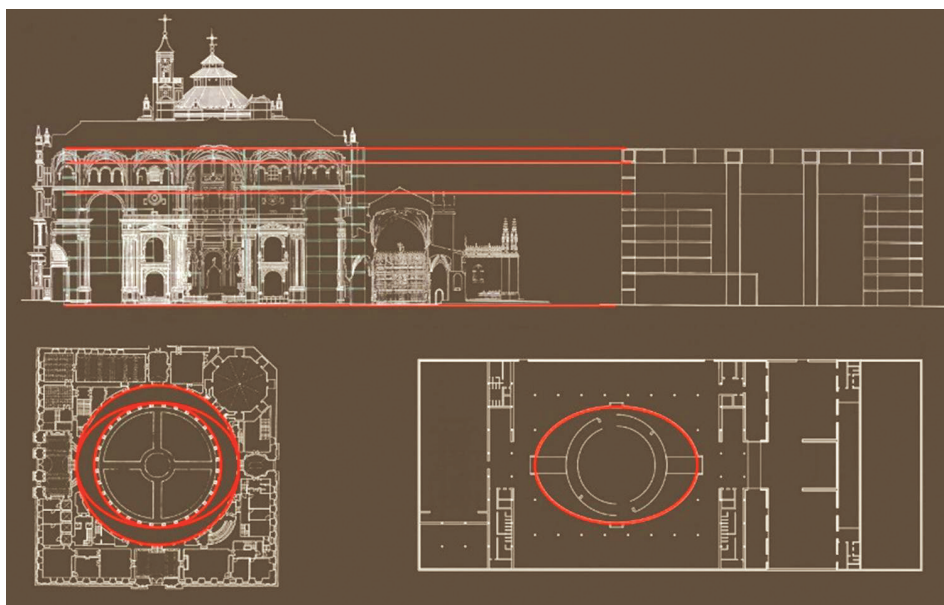


Fig. 10. Dimensional comparisons between the Cathedral of Granada and The Cube and the Palace of Charles V-Museum. Author's composition based on Campo Baeza drawings, 2019

Il. 10. Porównania wymiarowe pomiędzy katedrą w Granadzie a The Cube z pałacem Karola V. Kompozycja autora na podstawie rysunków Campo Baezy, 2019



great expressive load of the perfect circle that configures the courtyard of the Palace in the heart of the imbricated architecture of the Alhambra. Both the Cathedral and the Emperor's residence were built following the canons of beauty of the new Renaissance art and this aesthetic ideal is what the contemporary architect transposes to the periphery, integrating it into the heart of the rotund volumes of his new architectures. A transfer of foundational memory that gives timeless beauty, precisely, to the internal voids that turn The Cube and the Museum into a contemporary *Axis Mundi*, that archaic device capable of eradicating in a single stroke the *liminality* of the unformed space, turning it into a place.

### ***In conclusion, the timeless symbol***

The symbolic interpretation made about the Cube-Museum can be the object of an immediate criticism: the only

one qualified to do this reading would be the author of the works, since he is who best knows their conceptual origin. To refute this question, Mircea Eliade is quoted, who, referring to German romanticism, affirms:

*We have not even the right to restrict ourselves to what the authors thought about their own creations, if we would interpret the symbolism involved in them. The fact is that in most cases the author does not understand all the meaning of his work. Archaic symbolisms reappear spontaneously, even in the works of "realist" authors who know nothing about such symbols [...]. Symbols and myths come from such depths: they are part and parcel of the human being, and it is impossible that they should not be found again in any and every existential situation in the Cosmos [12, p. 25].*

### References/Bibliografia

- [1] Campo Baeza A., *The MA: Andalusia's Museum Memory, Granada (2009)* y *Caja Granada Savings Bank, Granada (2001)*, Online: campobaeza.com [accessed: 2019, May, 15].
- [2] Eliade M., *Cosmos and History. The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Harper & Brothers, New York 1959.
- [3] *Enuma Elish: The Seven Tablets of the History of Creation*, L.W. King (trans.), FQ Classics, New York 2007.
- [4] Leick G., *Mesopotamia: The Invention of the City*, Penguin, New York 2003.
- [5] Purce J., *The mystic spiral. Journey of the soul*, Thames & Hudson, London 2007.
- [6] Arnuncio J.C., *Peso y levedad. Notas sobre la gravedad a partir del Danteum*, Fundación Caja de Arquitectos, Barcelona 2007.
- [7] Eliade M., *The Sacred and the Profane*, Harcourt, Brace & World, New York 1959.
- [8] Van Gennep A., *The rites of Passage*, Routledge, London 2004.
- [9] Turner V., *The Ritual Process. Structure and Antistructure*, Aldine de Gruyter, New York 1969.
- [10] Eliade M., *History of Religious Ideas*, Vol. 1: *From the Stone Age to the Eleusinian Mysteries*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1981.
- [11] Santarcangeli P., *Il libro dei labirinti. Storia di un mito e di un simbolo*, Frassinelli, Milan 2005.
- [12] Eliade M., *Images and Symbols. Studies in Religious Symbolism*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 1991.

### Abstract

Despite the supposed desacralization of the contemporary world, it is still possible today to trace symbols that come from ancient times. The present article argues that although the symbols involved in the original act of the foundation of a city are distant in time, sometimes they can still be recognized in the construction processes of our cities. The analysis of a specific architectural complex developed in a contemporary city will exemplify the survival of the archetype in the development of our urban peripheries.

**Key words:** archaism, memory, urban periphery, symbol

### Streszczenie

Pomimo rzekomej desakralizacji współczesnego świata, wciąż jest możliwe podążanie symbolami pochodzącymi z czasów starożytnych. Niniejszy artykuł dowodzi, że symbole związane z pierwotnym aktem założenia miasta, choć odległe w czasie, wciąż można rozpoznać w procesach budowy naszych miast. Analiza konkretnego kompleksu architektonicznego, rozwiniętego we współczesnym mieście, egzemplifikuje archetyp rozwoju naszych urbanistycznych peryferii.

**Słowa kluczowe:** archaizm, pamięć, peryferie, symbol