ITALIAN INSTITUTE OF CULTURE IN BERLIN.
The Role of Open Spaces in the Transformation on Urban Landscape

The Tradition of Open Spaces in Cities and Modernity
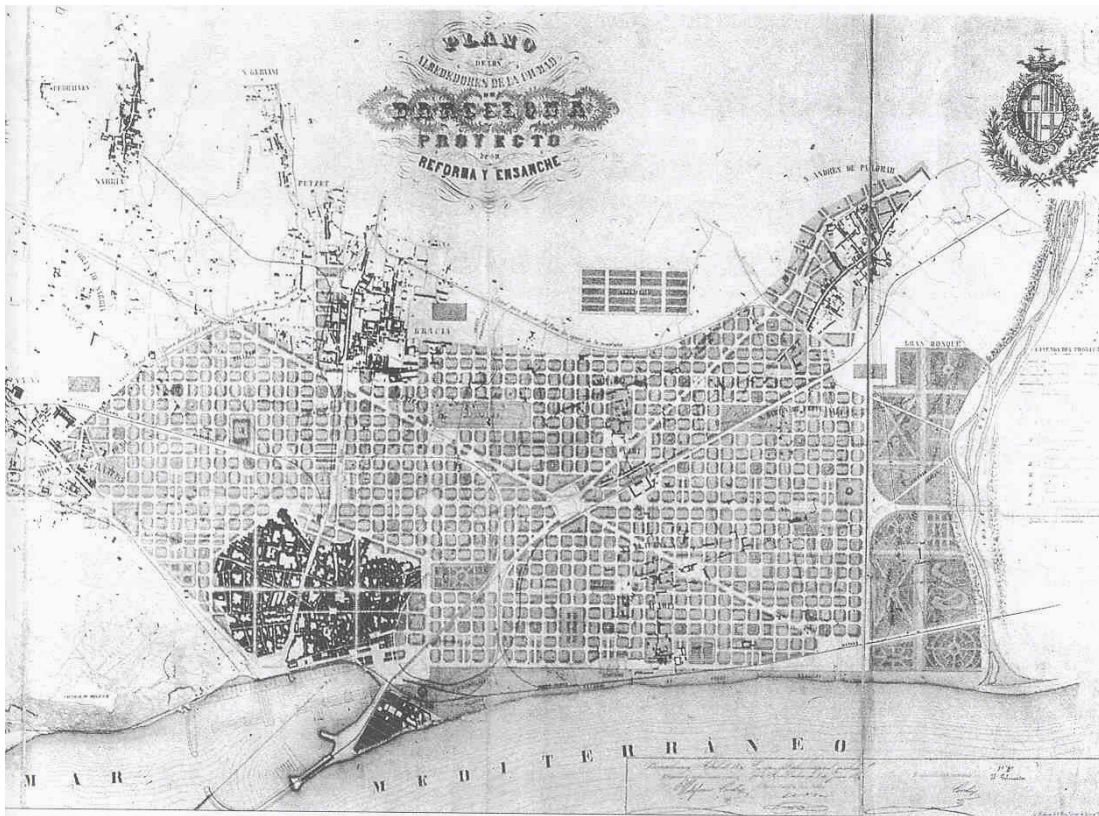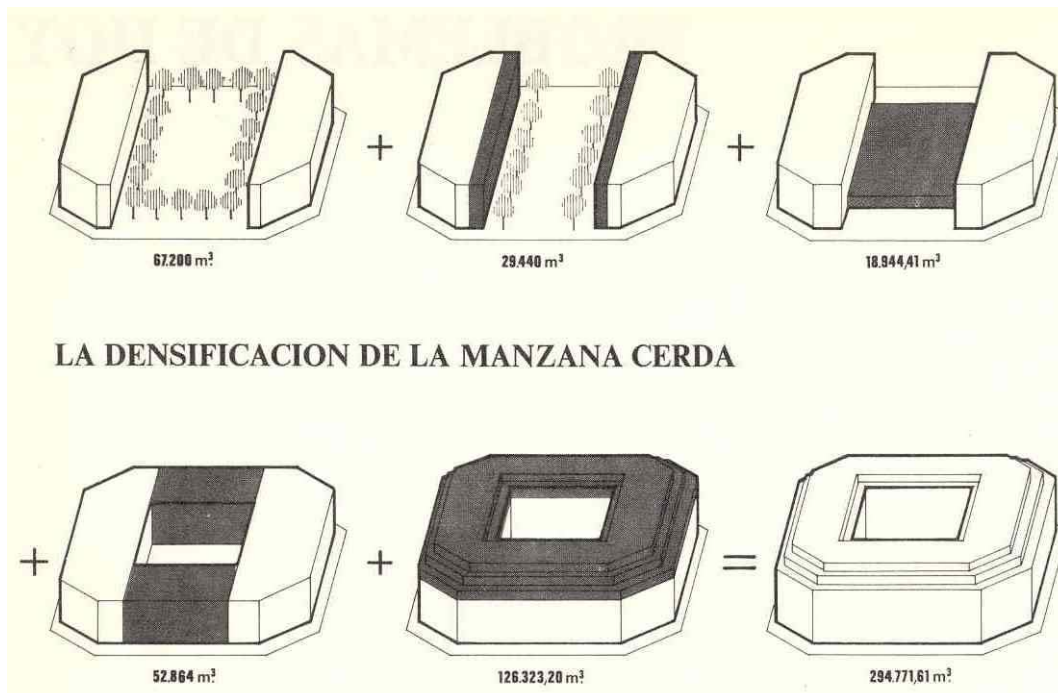Josefina Gómez-Mendoza, UAM, Madrid
josefina.gomez@uam.es
http:// josefinagomezmendoza.com

First Modernity, from Cerdà to Le Corbusier, has openly condemned, in the name of hygiene and circulation, the design of historical urban centres, rejecting both their construction and their open spaces: streets and lanes with a broken, curved layout and variable lengths and widths; squares, patios and courtyards, market gardens, gardens and wooded promenades. From this perspective, historical town needed to be renewed which meant partially demolished (Gómez-Mendoza, 2005).

Some of the planned urban extensions for town centres, in particular the extraordinary *Eixample* (or *Ensanche*) in Barcelona by Ildefonso Cerdà, constitute remarkable and unequalled pieces of design and urban conception (Figure 1). Undoubtedly, the most evident and emblematic aspect of the *eixample* is its reticular plan, but it would be a big mistake to perceive only the regular pattern in Cerdà's contribution. As a child of his century, the Catalan engineer and town-planner was pursuing the goal of an egalitarian city. He based the city upon the residential unit and his genius lay in making the most of the compact city through a continuous pattern of quadrangular "blocks of buildings" (*manzanas de casas, pâtés de maisons*), each side of 113.3 m and with chamfered corners at 45º. All the blocks had double ventilation to the streets and to an inner courtyard providing all the dwellings with light, sunshine and ventilation. This was how he conceived the "urbanisation of the country and ruralisation of the city", as he postulated in his *General Theory of Urbanisation* (Cerdà, 1859, 1861). In Cerdà's urban theory, there was a proportional relationship between circulating and living and between the width of the streets and the distribution of open and constructed spaces on the block. According to him, there should be "a perfect harmony between the dwelling and the mobility of sidewalkers, both on foot and on horseback". Nonetheless, in the endless implementation process of the *Eixample*, landowners, promoters, technicians and town councils came to disfigure the project and, as in many other cases, reduced the size of the open spaces. The engineer had projected blocks with buildings around a perimeter and inner courtyards almost always occupying half the area, but the reality is quite different because, in the vast majority of cases, the buildings occupy and compact most of the plots (Solà Morales, M., 1986) (Fig. 2).

67.200 m³ + 29.440 m³ + 18.944,41 m³

LA DENSIFICACION DE LA MANZANA CERDA

52.864 m³ + 126.323,20 m³ = 294.771,61 m³

In this initial stage, before the Modern Movement established its canons of design, of town construction, they were soma great landscape architects such as, for instance, in the case of Spain, Jean Claude Forestier, Javier de Winthuysen or Nicolau Rubió i Tudurí, with ambitious proposals in town planning. They all have a good knowledge both of the European tradition of wooded promenades and of the American parkways, and the desire to base construction of the city upon a system of open spaces, parks and boulevards. They were not echoed and could only be implemented in isolated projects. Forestier, for instance, said that «the boulevard-avenues constitute pleasant communication and access roads. They offer an uninterrupted stroll. They can also help to provide value to the viewpoints, riverbanks, and interesting landscapes." (Forestier, 1906; Le Dantec, 1996). In this sense, the engineer José de Lorite proposed for the city of Madrid a linear system of parks along the river, in the west of the city, making use of the topographic conditions to create cultural images and landscapes. "Goya's painting of the San Isidro meadow would suffice to make this part of Madrid an intangible place" (Lorite, 1931) (Fig. 3 and 4).

The Modern Movement, with Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe or Ludwig Hilberseimer, attempted to make cities healthy, with great open blocks of apartment residence rising up among gardens. Prior to the Chart of Athens, Le Corbusier had said in his first book, *Towards a new architecture*, in 1927: "Instead of towns being laid out in massive quadrangles, with the streets in narrow trenches walled in by seven-storey buildings set perpendicular on the pavement and enclosing unhealthy courtyards, airless and sunless walls, our new layout, employing the same area and housing the same number of people, would show great blocks of houses with successive set-backs, stretching along arterial avenues. No more courtyards, but flats opening on every side to air and light, and looking,

not on the puny trees of our boulevards of to-day, but upon green sward, sports grounds and abundant plantations of trees" (Le Corbusier, 1926 in 1946: 59-61). This is the criterion for the so-called "House Machine", for "Mass Production Houses", this mass production of buildings that are "healthy, morally and beautiful too". In his book, *L'urbanisme des trois établissments urbains* (1945), he postulated the death of streets: «Il faut tuer le corridor». (Fig.5) The aesthetics of what came to be called New Architecture opened up walls like curtains onto fresh air, light and sunshine, freeing the building from its heavy foundation and highlighting the importance of structural functions with simple and intelligent design; aesthetics that, according to Gropius, "respond as well to material needs as to psychological ones" (Gropius 1935).


In most cases, however, the urban landscapes developed under the theoretical auspices of the Modern Movement constitute great open-blocks complexes for public housing (*grands ensembles, polígonos de bloques abiertos, siedlungen*). Often they consisted of several rows of multi-storey walk-up apartments interspersed by slab blocks and point blocks. As in the case of Cerdà, the initial great ideas were betrayed: they gave way to monotonous, unsafe and banal environments. Many projects apparently based upon these principles gave rise to standardised urban landscapes, all too often sacrificed, in turn, to the so-called International Style and the creative option of the designer. But what is of greatest concern for our purpose here is that a town planning doctrine which precisely set the standards of public space has in practice led to the virtual disappearance of these spaces due to their inappropriate size and to the fact that they are unsafe and uncomfortable. In this respect, the

literature is well known, starting with the books of Edward Relph and Jane Jacobs, the former concluding with these words: «Great planning ideas have repeatedly been rendered mediocre by standardisation. […] To the extent that these hopes and aims could have been, but have not been, realised the modern urban landscape has to be judge a failure» (Relph, 1987: 264); and the latter defending that streets are the main, true and safe parts of a city (Jacobs, 1961: passim).


Before talking of contemporary extensions and peripheries, we should recapitulate upon the open spaces of the different urban layouts. A research project conducted in Madrid at the end of the last century measured the parameters of open public spaces and urban equipment as well as private spaces in the four main zones of urban evolution: in the old part of the city, in sectors of the planned bourgeois extension, in unplanned an poorer extension areas and in different estates of free-standing blocks, or *polígonos*. The results are noteworthy. In all the estates of blocks the open spaces constitute huge areas, always greater than 75% of the total surface and there is not private open space; instead in the planned extensions the open spaces not exceed 26 %, and nor 32 % in old city. It is interesting to note that, unexpectedly, contrary to the reasons for criticising the traditional city which brought about the initiative of the extensions, the open spaces are bigger in the former while the densities are greater in the latter. Correlatively, the private spaces are relatively small in the estates of blocks (20%) being generally equivalent only to the projection of the blocks, three times

this size in the extensions (62%) and over double in the city centre (56%). The population density of the different zones is also very expressive: denser in the Centre and Extension (1.4 hab/Ha) and less in the large multi-storey housing neighbourhoods (0.1 to 0.9 hab/Ha). These figures highlight the importance and variety of the open spaces in the traditional layouts and the flexibility provided to them by the relationship between public and private spaces through numerous mixed forms, whereas the spaces of the blocks of flats are completely void of this complementariness, and in this sense of poorer design (Martínez Sarandeses et al, 1999: 19).
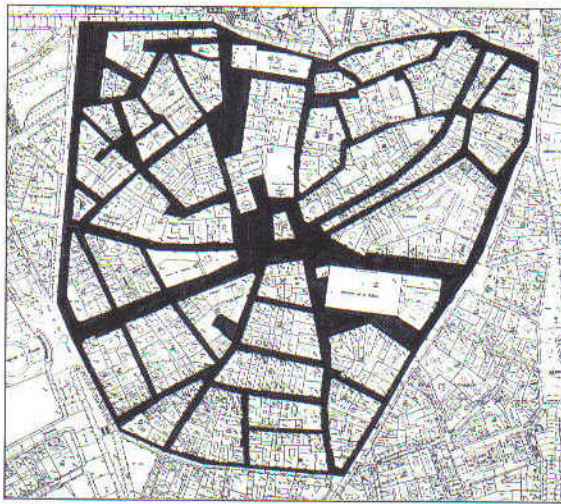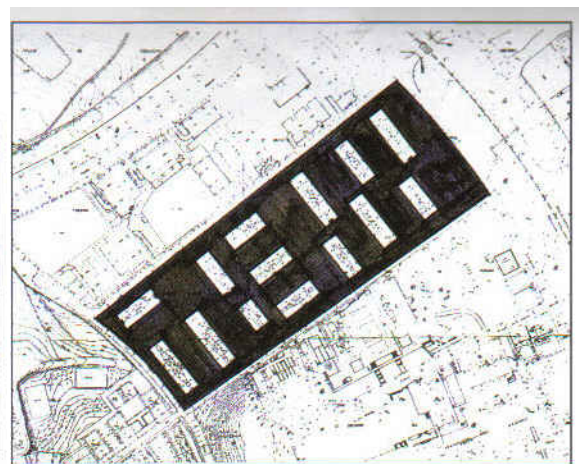

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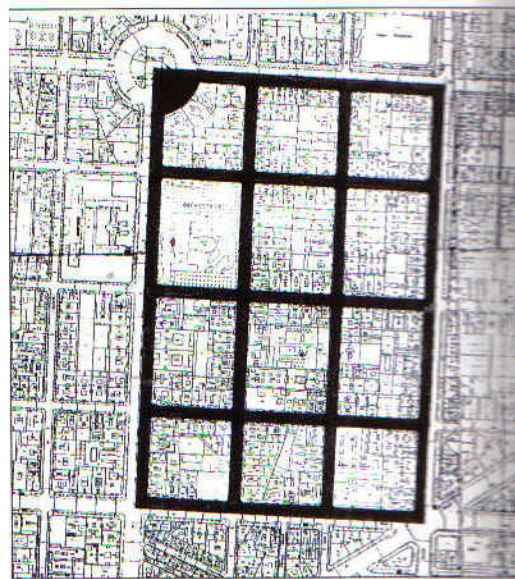
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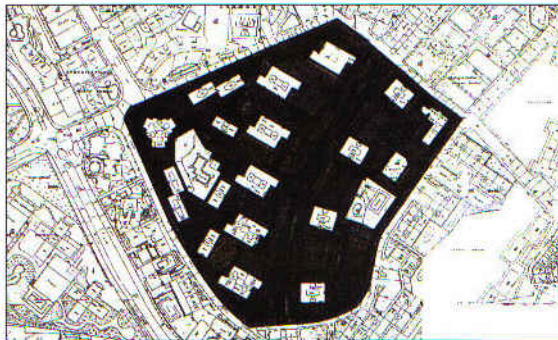
Espacios públicos

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After II World War and until seventies, in United Kingdom initially for eradication of slums and due to urgency of reconstruction, politicians and councillors who provided the political and organisational impetus behind large-scale housing production, supported ambitious plans of building of Modern blocks in British and Scottish towns. As many studies had pointed out from 1950's designers of the Modern Movement, especially those of the London County Council enjoyed both professional power and political backing. Twenty year latter the effects of the new forms in town were contested. «In fact, one can say than town planning and architectural preferences completely reversed between the late forties and the late sixties. In the forties, cottages or tenement lining traditional streets were condemned, while high blocks set in open space were praised; by the late sixties and early seventies a rejection of highs blocks and public open space had set in, and there was a renewal liking for 'traditional' rows of housing along ordinary streets» (Glendinning and Muthesius, 1994: 4).

In France, Spain or Italy, the flat tradition was strong and uncontentious, but the bad quality of materials, the physical layout of the blocks states as well as social considerations contribute to develop criticism against new neighbourhoods. From an open space point of view, the large multi-storey housing complexes constitute poor and homogeneous landscapes of parallel rows of similar narrow buildings, without courtyards and streets, and absence of blocks (*manzanas*) and plots (*parcelas*). During the eighties, urban social movements at grassroot level in Paris *Grand Ensembles* or in Madrid or Barcelona *polígonos* were common. In Madrid, the first democratic city council, after forty years of dictatorship, undertook in the first eighties a plan of slum clearance and neighbourhood's renewal (*Remodelación de barrios*) based upon new town planning criteria. The *Ensanche* tradition was revalued, and the block reintroduced. Bit differences between these news *ensanches* of the eighties and the historic one were considerable: posiciones periféricas, densidades en los nuevos ensanches más bajas que en los históricos, pomociones unitarias de grandes parcelas que corresponden a manzanas completas, plantas bajas destinadas a vivienda y no a comercios ni servicios, (without "eyes on the street" using the Jane Jacobs concept), prioridad concedida al viario, y sobre todo acceso unificado en un solo punto del perímetro de la manzana (López de Lucio, 2013, capítulo 9). Aunque sin duda las calidades físicas y sociales mejoraron considerablemente, siguieron existiendo problemas de diseño, con efectos sobre el acceso a los espacios abiertos, como sobre todo el dar lugar a manzanas cerradas y, por tanto, en cierto modo también, a gated communities.

The urban sprawl has diluted the margins and put an end to the compact city, occupying periphery with heterogeneous pieces that are all too often disproportionate, and almost eliminating the relationships that characterise a city. According to the architect Fernando de Terán, «we are in front of a 'non-city' which sprawls over territory, dotting it with expressways and other infrastructures, consuming natural [and cultural] landscapes and deteriorating the environment» (Terán, 2002: 38). What occurs in the peripheral city is opposite, in all senses, to the attributes we typically assign to our traditional cities (quoting other Spanish architect, a specialist in urban peripheries, Ramón López de Lucio, 2007:8-12): discontinuity, fragmentation, impermeable boundaries; functional specialisation in homogeneous packages, whether due to their use, their type of construction or the social class; a predominance of private cars; many huge shopping malls; an absence of streets because the roads, with no pedestrians, are limited to traffic; a metropolitan life that takes place in large constructed containers, such as shopping centres. «The periphery is any space lacking continuity or repetition or system» (Solà-Morales, I. 1992). It is a place, not so much of emptiness, but rather in which there is a persistent feeling that things are indifferent to each other, in which unity is achieved only by contiguity or proximity, a vertiginous succession of images more than a patchwork landscape. «The worlds of cinema and photography have appropriately captured the force of these landscapes in which both

activity and construction are always relegated by the divested space in which they are presented» (Solà-Morales, I. 1992: 2).

Many authors maintain that the peripheries are giving rise to the progressive construction of new aesthetic canons, relating above all to the *terrain vague,* a space of abandonment and void, which one drives through, contrasted and contradictory images occurring at a tremendous rate, a periphery of simultaneous kinetic perception, a landscape of zapping (Muñoz, F., 2012: 89-90 y 108-112). I have rarely had the chance to experience such an exciting and disturbing kinetic approach to peripheral landscapes as when I travelled last year in a high-speed train in China through the outskirts of the cities of Yangtse, with their extraordinary dimensions. In Chinese town planning, both traditional and socialist, one of the clearest features were boundaries between the cities and the large agricultural zones intended to supply them. Currently, along the uninterrupted urban corridor which follows the former Great Canal from Nanjing to Hangzhou, paddy fields of all sizes cohabit with the most extravagant types of buildings and multiple infrastructures. If one considers that in the last thirty years in China, migration from the country to the city has affected approximately 600 million people, and of these, around 200 million are illegal migrants who have moved into the undefined outskirts, then it can be assumed that peripheries are becoming the present city. Some use the term *sub-suburbanisation*.

Without reaching these dimensions, Madrid's periphery, deployed among its ring-roads, give rise to hybrid territories presenting highly varied uses, forms and sizes: motor ways and energy infrastructures, large extensions of the metropolitan cities, open neighbourhoods and gated communities, planned or spontaneous industrial estates, shopping centres, peripheral university campuses, business estates, big infrastructures, tertiary campuses, linear spontaneous settlements, interstitial spaces and agricultural remnants, abandoned spaces, large gated properties, marginal occupation of slums, whether linear or areal, etc. There are vast hybrid areas in which the public space is reduced to the interstices and to abandoned land, while the shopping malls designed by specialists in marketing and private promotion are becoming the New Public Squares, pertaining to a society of shows and consumerism.

In a world of automobiles, some of the pieces constructed as highly architectural ones attempt to respond to criteria of energy sustainability. On the outskirts of Madrid, one can find certain paradoxical examples such as the so-called Eco-Boulevard located in the *Ensanche* of the town of Vallecas. The project that won the international contest was presented as an innovative exercise of town planning that attempted to reinforce environmental comfort, promote social exchange and constitute a model of sustainable growth; the winning solution consisted of creating an enormous boulevard, with artefacts

called "air trees", self-sufficient from an energy point of view, where the idea was to bring people together in a comfortable environment. The financial crisis, along with the architecture of this new neighbourhood, which constitutes an extravagant catalogue of volumes and solutions, the disproportionate size of the boulevard, the artificialness of the "trees", the abandonment thereof, have all made of the Vallecas Urban Extension Plan an exhibition of failure and an counter-example of landscape. Within spaces of disproportionate design, invoking sustainability is not always reconciled with good landscape solutions.

The new urban peripheries contrast with all the previous urban areas in that they cannot be understood on the order and system of their layouts. This is well expressed by Ignasi Solà-Morales: «The contemporary city, the metropolis, the diffuse megalopolis, without limits, in permanent processes of formation and devastation, cannot longer be understood by means of a vision that finds support for permanent intelligibleness in the order of its patterns. The city of the twentieth century with its streets and avenues, squares and gardens, still presented a comprehensible, general and permanent form. In short, the city of Modern

Movement attempted, by means of centrality defining areas and transport infrastructures, to be seen as a simple and comprehensible structure. [...] In a situation of continuous construction and deconstruction, of permanent growth and renewal, of mutation and obsolescence, the unforeseeable condition of the current city becomes its true means of exhibition» (Solà Morales, 2002: 156-157).

This may be true, but this perspective of the unit as a whole should not prevent the attention paid to the large scale, to the minor areas or sectors. There is a need to recover traditional urban layouts in order to create a comfortable city and sustainable landscape, at least in concrete zones. As in all the processes I have been reviewing, the key still lies in open public spaces. Herein, there is a need for design, for guidelines of urban design containing appropriate rules of town planning and renewal, urbanisation and maintenance of open spaces. The exercise performed on a theoretical plane by the architect and town planner Martínez Sarandeses is a good example of this: he uses a basic design unit which suitably combines public and private open spaces as well as different roads and equipments. The proposal involves a basic module for a model of unlimited urban development which, compared with classical extensions, acquires the proportions of a "superblock". In the shape of a rotated rhombus, it is based on the application of certain parameters: maximum distance to the junctions of public transport, which is located at corners; decreasing gradient of density, from the outside to the inside of the block — from the blocks on the perimeter to the single-family units at the core; the layout and the hierarchy are those of a road system that is never linear; the gradient too, in the public spaces, runs from the small intermediate square to the large central park. All of this makes up an autonomous organism generating a city by means of addition and which is seen as an approach to utopian thinking, but is based upon absolutely pragmatic principles (Martínez Sarandeses et al, 1999: 11-41)
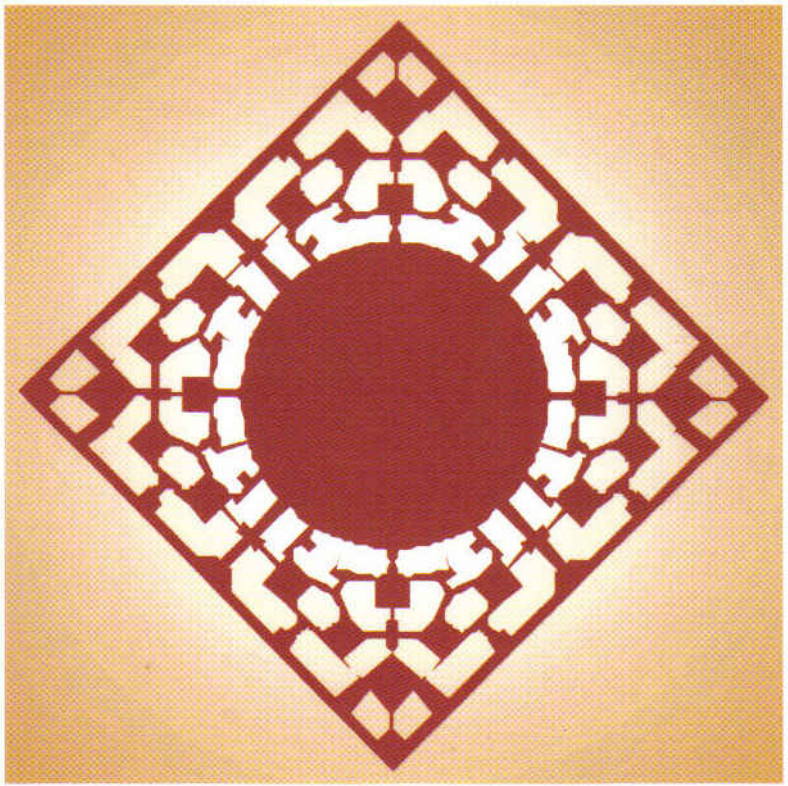
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