

Architectural Heritage

The conquest of Tenerife in the late 15th century led to the fragmentation of the indigenous society, largely made up of small communities dwelling in caves and huts.

The newly imposed European culture brought different models of settlement in the form of urban masses, which obeyed economic and strategic factors. Disperse settlements on estates and in modest country dwellings also became common. The development of urban centres over the next five hundred years was irregular, owing to periods of slowdown associated with emigration and the economic crises that affected the island cyclically, interspersed with others of expansion, spurred on by favourable circumstances with the rise of agricultural exports.

The result then was a series of historical centres distinguished—save a few exceptions such as La Laguna and La Orotava—by their limited size and their marked rural nature. Agriculture and stockbreeding were the driving force behind this growth, though the secondary activities associated with expansion were not underpinned by accompanying administrative and service functions.

These centres are, however, an important part of local architectural heritage and testament to a physical and functional evolutionary process, which has survived the test of time in varying degrees of conservation, despite the threat of uncontrolled development in the last few decades. The entry into force of the Historical Heritage of the Canary Islands Act and the decisive action of the *Cabildo Insular* or Tenerife Island Council have led to greater control over operations in historical centres, with a view to guaranteeing their preservation.

Numerous examples of traditional architecture have survived the ravages of time in several villages and towns around the island. This ‘Canary Islands way’ of construction, widespread throughout the region for more than three centuries, has been defined as a variant of mudejar architecture, which originated in the Iberian Peninsula, yet was heavily influenced by the local environment, the materials available and the economic and social reality of the island at each historical moment. The result was a diversity of building solutions. Influence was considerable, highly varied and often difficult to trace, though Portuguese elements are a main feature, and both Andalusia and Castile provided construction techniques and models.

The end result has been described as ‘eclectic’ or ‘syncretic’ and was full of enduring invariants that persisted largely unchanged until the 19th century.

The defining features of traditional architecture include rough stone load-bearing walls with stone quoins for added strength and wood carpentry, which was used profusely and can be seen in rafters, alcoves, balconies and galleries. Roofs were always covered in Arab or curved tiles, but from the 18th century on, flat or terrace roofs were gradually introduced, particularly in areas of low rainfall.

Enlarge photo.

Domestic dwellings were arranged around a central or side courtyard, as a source of light and ventilation, thus ensuring privacy for the family and inter-connecting all the rooms.

A cultured architectural style was superimposed on this common way of building, expressed in exceptional edifices—occasionally of considerable size—which introduced the features of the artistic style prevailing in Europe at the time. As a result, gothic, renaissance and particularly baroque elements could frequently be observed in churches, convents and civil buildings belonging to the well-to-do, who concentrated these refined details in the most visible areas of their dwellings in their eagerness to set themselves apart from the rest of the population.

The rise to power of the middle classes in the 19th century brought with it a profound transformation at all levels of society and culture, which also affected town planning and architecture. The island's old towns underwent refurbishment, new streets were created according to a more rational layout and sculptures, fountains, squares and gardens were renovated and embellished. Public architecture gained in strength and new types of buildings emerged in which form and function were inextricably linked. Fine examples of this were the Guimerá and Leal theatres, in Santa Cruz de Tenerife and La Laguna, respectively, as were the marketplaces and town halls, recreation centres, *casinos* or private clubs and hospitals, such as the former Hospital de los Desamparados.

This architectural renewal largely occurred in Santa Cruz de Tenerife, owing to its rising importance as island capital and its extraordinary growth in population, economic vitality and hegemonic struggle with Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. Nevertheless, the island's other towns—La Laguna, La Orotava, Puerto de la Cruz and Icod de los Vinos—also boasted examples of the new styles introduced in those two centuries. Manuel de Oráa's romantic classicism, the fin-de-siècle eclecticism that rubbed shoulders with neo-gothic, neo-mudejar and modernist trends, expressed in the work of Antonio Pintor and Mariano Estanga, and the impulse of architectural internationalism or rationalism in the 1920s were other milestones in the construction of the island's urban centres— genuine heritage landmarks on account of their inherent architectural value and their importance as a testimony to local history.