



UBEDA

A RENAISSANCE TOWN

special contribution

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ABSTRACT

Úbeda, together with its neighbouring town, Baeza, have recently been declared World Heritage Sites by the UNESCO due to their architectonic and urbanistic value, chiselled during the Renaissance. The fact that Úbeda was the birthplace of Francisco de los Cobos, Secretary of State to the Emperor Charles V, and the fortune of having found in the architect Andrés de Vandelvira the hand with which to complete some of his projects, were decisive circumstances to achieving such a magnificent town.

The town of Úbeda, considered today to be one of medium size, in the past constituted one of the first fifteen towns of Spain, mainly between the end of the XVth century and during the XVIth. Her urbanising process, just like other towns in Andalusia, has been long and complex; beginning in protohistoric times and within this process, estratigraphically superimposing different Mediterranean cultures from the classical world (Roman, Visigoth, Arab,

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Jewish and Christian). This has resulted in conferring on her a large urban experience, as she also once formed a nucleus which controlled a large area within the crucial communication route between the east and the south of the Iberian peninsula, as well as a rich architectonic heritage.

She still possesses a large part of her medieval walls, towers and doorways in which Christian and Islamic constructive forms and techniques are combined. Examples of these include the so-called doorway "Puerta del Losal" with its zig-zag entrance, or the globular profile of what was once her oldest citadel, in which one can see traces of what was once her Jewish quarter through the Hebraic symbols carved on the doors of some houses, and the sinuous lines of her narrow blind streets, witness to the Muslim narrow defensive streets or "adarves". But the dominant image we have of modern Úbeda is of her monuments built during the XVIth century with the concept and taste of the Renaissance, clearly inspired by Italy but adapted to the local and Spanish tradition.



The fundamental reason for this architectonic impact, making her worthy of the title "World Heritage Site", together with the neighbouring town of Baeza, is mainly due to her fortune of being the birthplace of Francisco de los Cobos, Secretary of State to the Emperor Charles V, a man of enormous power and influence in the Europe of the XVIth century. Set on perpetuating his name and that of his family, Cobos thought up a structure of cultural, charitable and religious buildings (a University, a hospital, a-chapel-pantheon) as well as a palace or personal residence, and all this despite having hardly lived in the town. From his vast project, only the chapel and the hospital ("el hospital de honrados ancianos") and the beginning of his palace were realised, yet the chapel alone constitutes a landmark for Ubeda's urban transformation as it presides the wide open space which today is considered perhaps the most perfect of Spain's Renaissance squares. The architect Diego de Siloe, trained in Italy, author of the project of Granada's Cathedral, is also responsible for this funeral chapel, and as such is inspired by the circular Roman Pantheon, the shape par excellence for a mausoleum of classic tradition, whose cylindrical surface on high opens daringly through an arch to connect with the longitudinal space of the church's nave, a formula already put into practice by León B. Alberti in the Malatesta Temple in Rimini.

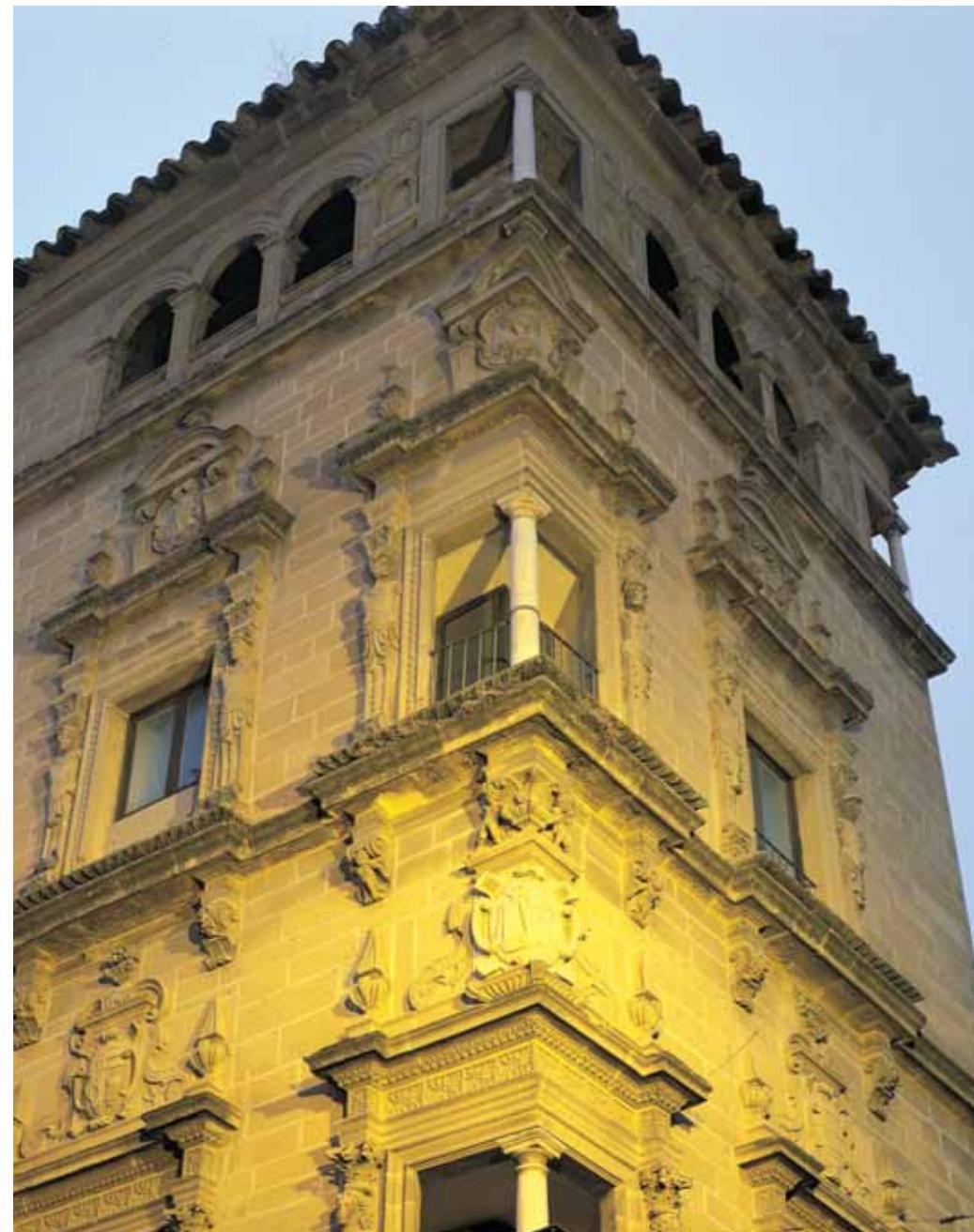




This temple is interesting in that, just like other religious and civil architecture which we can see in the town, its constructive technique is totally stereotomic. A technique which was already widely used traditionally in France and Spain since the Middle Ages, it was now enriched with the application of Euclidean geometry in order to obtain spherical shapes, essential to the “Roman” or “classic” style, that is to say, Renaissance, dominated by the semi-circular or Roman arch, and semicircular vaults. This chapter in Renaissance stereotomic architecture or building with “cuts of stone”, was especially notable in the Spanish Renaissance and one of its most famous artists was Andrés de Vandelvira, the architect who realised Siloé’s project, adding new flourishes, such as the vestry, where we find an arched doorway opening into a right angle, a real example of masonic virtuosity.

From the building of Cobos’s funeral chapel, under the name and protection of “The Saviour”, El Salvador (1540), Vandelvira came to be the Secretary of State’s favourite family architect and in reality was the architect who, until his death in 1575, was in charge of all major

architecture realised in Úbeda and in the diocese of Jaén. For Fernando Ortega, a cleric, who was the Dean of the cathedral of Málaga and the man who negotiated matters with Francisco de los Cobos in Úbeda, Vandelvira constructed the palace which lies next to the Chapel of El Salvador, which is today a “parador de turismo”, matching the architectonic severity of the Chapel. A few metres further down, keeping in line with the palace, another palace was raised, also contrived by Vandelvira for Juan Vázquez de Molina, a relative of Francisco de los Cobos, who also, like the latter, was Secretary of State, but to Philip II. It is a free-standing building whose façade the architect gave the aspect which Vitruvius’s first commentators conceived as belonging to a Roman house. These three buildings, the two palaces and the church, are the great protagonists of this public area, which is both representative and monumental and which, as stated above, constitute the greatest Spanish Renaissance square, to which has been added, in recent times, a fountain at its centre, from Italy, which once belonged to Francisco de los Cobos’s palace.



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Other palatial houses built by the same architect for members of the Cobos-Molina family mark the inner wall area of Úbeda: the Palacio Vela de Cobos and the Palacio del Marqués de la Rambla. Both of them boast formal variants following the Renaissance style and stylistic elements of the Spanish Medieval tradition, such as their arches on the upper body of their façade or their openings on their corners. However, the most ambitious work with which Andrés de Vandelvira practically finished his career was the Hospital de Santiago. Raised on the outskirts of the town, outside its walls, sponsored by the bishop Diego de los Cobos, who also belonged to this influential family, this building, due to its dimension and original typological conception, in which the purely sanitary area fuses with the bishop's residence, and a chapel for his burial, constitutes the most personal work of the architect, with an utterly abstract and geometrical style dominated by the perfectly integrated balance of mass and volume.