



Architecture and the Self-fashioning of the Imperial Image

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A review of: Laura Fernández-González, *Philip II of Spain and the Architecture of Empire*, Pittsburgh: Penn State Press, 2021, 176 pages, ISBN 978-0-271-08724-5. This is a review of the publication by Laura Fernández-González, *Philip II of Spain and the Architecture of Empire* (2021). Through a detailed analysis of buildings and building regulation, the architecture of archives, festivals and celebratory frescoes, the author shows the complexity and diversity of the architecture of the Spanish empire. The book is a refreshing study on the self-fashioning of Philip II and the role of architecture in the construction of the Spanish Empire.

Keywords: archives; building regulation; Philip II; Spanish empire



PHILIP II *of* SPAIN *and* *the* ARCHITECTURE *of* EMPIRE



LAURA FERNÁNDEZ-GONZÁLEZ

In *Philip II of Spain and the Architecture of Empire*, Laura Fernández-González examines the circulation of images depicting the Spanish Empire, looking in particular at buildings that contributed to the Empire's identity but have received little scholarly attention. The author demonstrates how the king's interventionist approach and the agency of local actors played a fundamental role in the construction of the Spanish Empire. Using new evidence, including drawings and correspondence, her approach

challenges traditional interpretations of the court at Madrid as the centre from where images and ideas travelled to the Empire's periphery. Fernández-González argues that Philip II's empire was complex and multidirectional, developing simultaneously in different territories, complicating categorical binaries such as centre/periphery and American/European.

The buildings from where the Empire was administered had an important role in presenting the Empire as a powerful, trans-oceanic domain demonstrating the authority and control of the emperor over its territories. The pageants organised for imperial entries and funerary pomp emphasised Philip's lineage of Christian kings, his messianic mission, and his responsibility for the well-being of his people.

Divided into four chapters, the book addresses the construction, circulation and consolidation of the imperial image during the rule of Philip II. In the first chapter, the author employs newly discovered 16th-century residential plans and reports submitted for building permits, illustrating how building laws were implemented at the time when Philip II moved the court to Madrid. Legislation, Fernández-González points out, became the instrument through which to enact the idea of an ordered city that Philip II envisioned. Officials were allowed to regulate and supervise construction. Homeowners, builders, and local authorities, as agents of empire, helped to shape the urban fabric of the city. Moreover, focusing on the construction of the city of Madrid allows the author to demonstrate that building practices developed in parallel on the Peninsula and in the Americas; Madrid was not the leading center for building practices but rather another location where Philip's ideas were implemented.

The second chapter examines the archive at Simancas as a symbol of Philip II's power. Housing administrative documents of the empire, it evolved from a medieval fortress to a modern archive, reflecting the transformation of the Crown of Castile into an overseas empire. Using architectural drawings, accounts, and newly found correspondence between Philip and the archivist, the author demonstrates the participation of the king in the architecture and governance of the archive. The king stipulated that the private character of the building helped define limited access to the archive's documents. Its remote location and its austere architecture were not intended for visitors other than the king's officials; access to the documents required authorization by the king.

This chapter is an important contribution to the study of archives and their architecture. Moreover, it examines the work of Juan de Herrera at Simancas, a building considered secondary to his masterpiece at El Escorial. Through the association of the archive with the king and his image, Fernández-González highlights the importance of this project in the self-fashioning of Philip II. The analysis of the building places it

within the vernacular tradition of medieval treasuries, expanded first by adding two rooms, one by Charles V and a second by Philip II, and most significantly extended in the last years of Philip's life.

The evolution of the archive at Simancas that the chapter traces illustrates how decisions made for its expansion and governance were influenced by territories outside Spain. The expansion project was, in part, required to store the large number of documents arriving from the New World. Likewise, the instructions for the governance of the archive were modelled on those of the archive at Torre de Tombo in Portugal, an archive Philip once visited. Fernández-González shows the impact of territories outside the Spanish realm, demonstrating the insufficiency of centre-narrative discourses in the study of the construction of the Spanish Empire.

Through the study of ephemeral architecture built for the entrance of Philip II to Lisbon in 1581, the third chapter examines the imagery of the king that emerged after the unification of the Iberian Peninsula in 1581. Based on literary sources and the author's graphic reconstructions, the chapter examines the narrative and complexity of the event. It studies the role of the king in the pageant, the importance of the river, the participation of local peoples, the different structures built, and their iconography. The chapter focuses on a few structures, and through a detailed description, shows what this event, which acknowledged the reconstitution of Roman Iberia, meant to different people and how they engaged with it.

Spain's political supremacy and the image of Philip II as a Christian prince emerges from the reading of the entry to Lisbon in 1581, drawn from images circulating in the empire at large. The entry solidified an image that travelled back to the different territories and manifested in different media celebrating the king. The frescoes of the Hall of the Battles at El Escorial share some of the themes that emerged from the entry, such as the battle of La Higuera, the fresco with which the fourth chapter begins. It traces its origin to a 15th-century wall hanging documenting the battle in 1431. Fernández-González convincingly argues how the fresco was commissioned by Philip II to preserve the account the original saga recorded. The themes associated with the Hall of the Battles appear in the eulogies composed for the different funerary ceremonies celebrating Philip II's death across the Empire. Tracing the imagery of the frescoes at the Hall of the Battles at El Escorial into the verses composed for the king, the author demonstrates how at the end of his life, the image of the king and of his kingdom, for which Philip II had worked so tirelessly, had solidified and were ingrained in the Empire at large.

Fernández-González uses primary materials not studied before for expanding and revising some of her previous work on festivals and building laws in the early modern

Iberian world. The book's perspective on the different territories of the Spanish Empire challenges traditional scholarship in unexpected ways. Rather than explaining the evolution of the images representing the Spanish Empire as a unidirectional phenomenon starting in Spain and spreading through the territories, the book demonstrates that the process is multidirectional, and images appear simultaneously in different places, indicating the agency of travellers from Europe and America.

The graphic material included in the book is outstanding, an aid to understanding the spaces studied. The book reproduces original drawings and documents of buildings that no longer exist or are heavily modified, allowing the reader to imagine how they were in the 16th century. It includes photographs by the author that provide a precise point of view of the places under discussion. In the instances where there are no graphic sources available or the buildings are no longer standing, the author has drawn plans, perspectives, and three-dimensional reconstructions of the spaces under examination, helping the reader imagine and understand the spaces described. This use of graphic methods to support the book's arguments is one of the most significant contributions, bridging the gap in scholarship between art history and architecture.

The concept of a Pan-Iberian lexicon is presented both in the introduction to the book and in the introductions to each individual chapter. This will facilitate a reading of the chapters individually, although, when read as a whole, the introductions become repetitive. The effort to unify the chapters and their chronological arrangement forces a single reading of the book and obscures other themes emerging from the research, such as the urban aspects of Philip II's imperial policy, the agency and reception of imperial images by non-elite locals, and architecture as place for memory.

The invitation the author makes in the epilogue to expand on the work begun in this book is exciting and will certainly attract scholars who are interested in comparative art histories and working on less studied geographies, typologies, and actors. The work of Fernandez-González is part of recent scholarship on the Spanish Empire, where new sources and methods are being explored to expand the study of a subject that challenges existing narratives such as centre/periphery, the division between European and American studies, and the exaltation of high art over vernacular and local traditions. Within the scholarship emerging from less represented territories of the Spanish Empire and comparative studies, *Philip II of Spain and the Architecture of Empire* is an exemplar study on the self-fashioning of Philip II and the role of architecture in the construction of the Spanish Empire.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

