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When Philosophy Meets Architecture: How Utopian Dream of One Visioner Transformed the Island of Fire

Abstract

This article explores the architectural mission of an accomplished Spanish artist, thinker, and architect, César Manrique, which he undertook on his native island of Lanzarote, along with its impact, and the legacy he left. It provides his biographical note and highlights that a spirit of the place, 'genius loci,' was of a significant importance to Manrique, influenced his return to the island and informed his body of work. This paper also explains that a driving force behind the architect's passion was his life-long dream of utopia and argues that his mission of creating it proved successful. It discusses his selected projects and their features characteristic to the unique Manrique's style and how they perfectly blend with the traditional architecture of the island, and how they serve local communities and tourists alike. It also argues that Manrique's deep connection with nature and respect for environment had significant impact on his work, and that it places him among pioneers implementing ideas of sustainable architecture and environmental care in their projects. This paper also explains how through relentless documentation and personal involvement in conversations, Manrique raised a lasting awareness of the unique value of Lanzarote's cultural and architectonic heritage to its inhabitants.

Key Words

nature, spirit of a place, 'genius loci,' environment, protection, community, culture, legacy, heritage, traditional architecture, utopia, authenticity, development, architectural interventions, landscape

Introduction

Heraclitus of Ephesus maintained that everything comes from a fire, which was the arche, the beginning of orderly universe (Britannica, 2023). Looking at the island of Lanzarote (Fig.1) one can easily agree with his thesis. This fourth largest of the Archipelago of the Canary Islands, located 125 kilometres off the Western African coast island is of a volcanic origin. Multiple eruptions which occurred there during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries created its unique landscape and shaped Montañas del Fuego - the Mountains of Fire (lanzaroteguide.com, 2024 line 8). Lava fields, tubes, and bubbles, caves and craters, extreme scenery of the Timanfaya National Park served as a training ground for the astronauts because the island's surface resembles the Moon or Mars. The heat coming from the ashes of Lanzarote is a constant reminder of ever-present volcanic activity (turismolanzarote.com, 2023 para 4). Places like that are not easy ones to inhabit. Scarce vegetation, infertile land almost impossible to grow crops, and no access to sweet water are not the most desired conditions for people to settle.

Yet this bare, rocky island carries a significant beauty and authenticity, and 'the 'spirit of the place' or 'genius loci'—a concept that captures the unique, indefinable character and atmosphere that distinguishes one place from another' is remarkable on Lanzarote (El Moussaoui, 2024 p.14). Tsai, Chung, and Hsu (quoted in El Moussaoui, 2024 p.14) argue that a "place' [is] a term that transcends physical descriptions and involves the layers of personal and social meanings that individuals and communities assign to a location.' Through interaction with their environment, they connect it with their experiences, create memories, build a collective memory, preserve a historical narrative, and thus strengthen the bonds and form a unique identity of the place (El Moussaoui, 2024). These observations correspond with the ones made by Martin Heidegger (1971), who maintained that the way we experience space depends on its importance to us and on the meaning, it holds for us.

For César Manrique (1919-1992), an artist, architect, environmental and political activist born and raised on Lanzarote, the island was such a special place, and he could sense its

spirit. He considered that ‘being born in this scorched geography in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean would influence any moderately sensitive being’ (turismolanzarote.com, 2023 line 3). It certainly inspired him and resulted with over 25 years of his contribution to the island and its community. The lasting impact his vision and creations had on them earned him the status of a local legend. This article will explore how Manrique’s mission of preserving the island’s nature, identity, and authenticity informed his projects, and what was a driving force behind his passion. It will also discuss his selected projects and argue that Manrique was amongst pioneers implementing ideas of sustainable architecture and environmental care long before these terms became popular, and who raised a lasting awareness of Lanzarote’s unique value to its inhabitants.

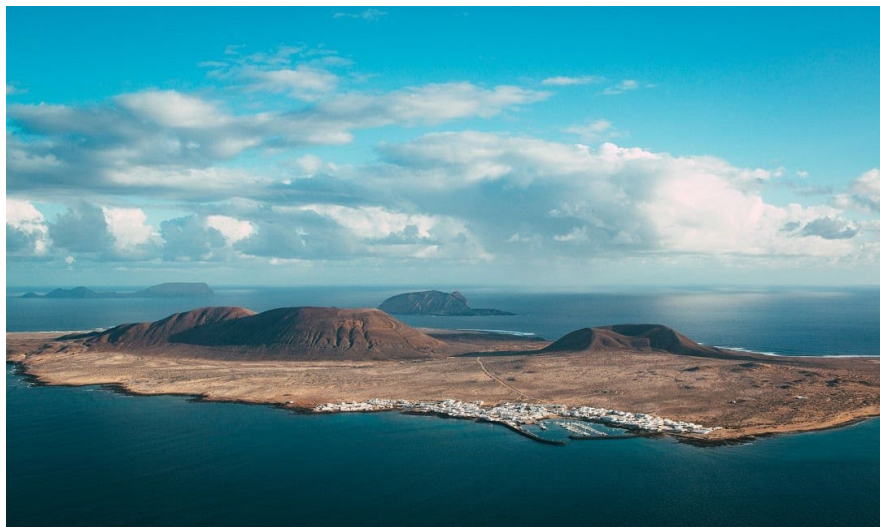


Fig.1 [*Canary Islands: Lanzarote*] [online image] (n.d.)
Available at: <https://www.verychic.co.uk/holidays/lanzarote>
[Accessed: 9th January 2024]

‘A Philosopher of Architecture’ (Otto quoted in Scarpa, 2021 p.88)

This nickname given to Manrique (Fig.2) by Frei Otto has been supported by Paulina Tendra, who argues that ‘César Manrique’s writings, diaries and letters are of great poetic and philosophical value’ as they transfer a reader into the world of art and nature what shapes and refines the human spirit (2016, p.59). Surprisingly, Manrique never obtained either philosophical or architectural degree. Born in Arrecife in a middle-class family, he spent his formative years absorbing harsh beauty of his native island. In 1939, he returned home after voluntarily joining the Republican forces in the Spanish Civil War and refused to ever talk about the atrocities and horrors he witnessed. He briefly studied architecture at the Canarian La Laguna University, before deciding to move to Madrid, where he joined the San Fernando Fine Arts Academy to become a painter and sculptor. He had been an accomplished artist, exhibiting in Spain and abroad, when after almost twenty years spent in the Spanish capital, he moved to New York where he had a chance to directly examine the newest trends in art. However, even though he was granted a Nelson Rockefeller art sponsorship and held three solo exhibitions in the prestigious New York gallery Catherine Viviano, he was not happy there (Fcmanique.org, 2024). Limited spaces of the city packed with skyscrapers gave him a sensation of suffocation and imprisonment. Dominique Rouillard (quoted in Picon, 2013 p.19) reflects the light on that kind of reaction explaining that ‘[T]he lack of relationship to the exterior makes it comparable to a prison.’ Manrique could not stand the city’s artificiality and longed for the unspoiled, open spaces of his native island where he sensed he belonged. Eventually, he returned to Lanzarote in 1966 and realising its extraordinary potential, he immediately embarked on a project to preserve the island’s natural beauty whilst developing his lifelong dream of creating a utopia.

This term, originally used by Sir Thomas More in 1516 as a title of his famous book *Utopia* (1516), derives from the Greek ‘ou’ and ‘topos’, meaning ‘nowhere’. More described Utopia as a distant island inhabited by an ideal society, an island just like Lanzarote (Picon, 2013). The idea of a utopia has a long and complex connection with architecture and many architects, e.g., Le Corbusier, pursued that concept in their creations. As Antoine Picon

(2013, p.19) maintains, utopia and architecture were both engaged in '[T]he growing gap between the natural and industrial worlds' and both 'tried to fully equip and manage the earth, even if this implied preserving large territories as natural reserves.' Manrique (quoted in Scarpa, 2021 p.88) considered that 'each of our steps must be aimed at building more and more of the dream space of utopia.' Execution of that dream, along with attempts to preserve the past and Manrique's respect for nature, combined into a driving force behind his actions undertaken upon return to the island and successfully pursued, until stopped abruptly by his sudden death in a car accident in 1992.



Fig.2 [Cesar Manrique in his studio] [online image] (n.d.)

Available at: <https://turismolanzarote.com/en/discover-lanzarote/arts-and-culture/cesar-manrique/>
[Accessed: 9th January 2024]

Inspirations

In 1966 Lanzarote was still a quiet place, with no extent of tourists and the landscape unspoiled by the oversized hotels and infrastructures. Manrique was impressed that the island has not changed much since his departure twenty years earlier. Fearing that the inevitable development will bring masses of people and big companies who for the sake of their businesses will not refrain from inflicting permanent damage to the island's unique environment and style, he decided to put every effort into preserving it. As he specially appreciated Lanzarote's traditional architecture; low-rise, white, and modest (Fig.3),

creating a stark contrast with the blackness of lava fields, green of sparse vegetation, and blue of the sky and the Atlantic Ocean, he documented it extensively (Scarpa, 2021). He also convinced islanders to maintain it and keep in a decent shape, whilst insisting that new developments should follow traditional style and remain discreet and respectful to surrounding landscape (Richardson, 2018). Manrique's mission was fully supported by his childhood friend, José Ramírez Cerdá, then-President of the island what allowed the architect to contribute 'to the economic and social functionalism of his native land in an unprecedented way' (Hencz, (n.d.) line 9).



Fig.3 *Street sketches in the village of Yaiza. Lanzarote. Canary Islands.* [online image] (n.d.)
Available at: <https://www.insightguides.com/destinations/europe/spain/canary-islands/lanzarote>
[Accessed: 9th January 2024]

Visioner on a Mission

Manrique (quoted in Tendra, 2016 p.62) maintained that he had a sense 'of being absolutely one with Nature' and that it permanently marked his life. Galante (quoted in Tendra, 2016 p.64) argues that '[L]ike many transcendentalists, César Manrique treated nature as a source of mystical experience' whilst Tendra (2016, p.64) adds that nature was of the greatest interest to the artist, that he combined it with his life and creations, he drew 'the ultimate principles of beauty, form and harmony' from it, and he always aimed to deepen his relationship with it. Therefore, the multiple projects he created for the island, derived from its specific nature (Fig.4), respected it, and aimed to protect it. Manrique (quoted in Tendra, 2016 p.68) considered it essential to ensure a 'respect for every part of the earth, with its own materials and tradition, while adding only the best part of progress, without breaking the harmony of the place.' As a visionary and believer in the power of transformation he pursued his utopian dream by creating 'epicentres of development ... that would serve as inspiration' which he hoped would spread globally (Scarpa, 2021 p.88). Manrique was aware of the paradoxes shared by utopia and architecture, of their eternal quest to preserve and draw from the past, remaining historically relevant, and yet to ensure timelessness and modernity of the creation (Picon, 2013 p.20). He decided to focus on degraded areas of the island, where his architectural interventions could turn abandoned buildings or derelict land into meaningful places serving local community and visitors, places with a potential to provide experiences, create memories, and strengthening the island's 'genius loci' (Scarpa, 2021 p.88).



Fig.4 [*Timanfaya, National Park. Lanzarote*] [online image] (n.d.)
 Available at: <https://visitlanzarote.es/en/volcanoes-lanzarote/>
 [Accessed: 9th January 2024]

Building Utopia

Manrique produced the idea of building a network of eight Centres of Art, Culture and Tourism (CACTs) at various locations around the island and serving different purposes (Richardson, 2018). In all his projects he used elements inspired by the local architecture which he so carefully documented; low-rise, simple cubical forms, rounded walls, bright white paint, natural stone, and wood. Amongst his most important projects are the following examples:

Jameos del Agua (1968) (Fig.5, 6)

The first of the cultural centres completed by César Manrique on Lanzarote in 1968 is a gem hidden in the field of lava which can only be seen when one approaches the edge of the massive opening in the ground. Jameo is a Spanish term for a collapsed roof of a volcanic tube and this one was formed during the eruption of the Volcán de la Corona

(cactlanzarote.com, 2024 para 1). Terraces built into the rock walls surrounding the Jameos provide an exhibition space of the House of Volcanoes Museum. At the bottom of the hollow is a turquoise lagoon lake with a palm tree leaning over it and a bright white pavement surrounding its waters. A unique auditorium descends into the volcanic cave connected with the ocean by the Atlantis Tunnel which provides saltwater where tiny albino crabs live. Manrique took care of every detail, designing even furniture for the restaurant and planning all vegetation on the premises. His intervention blends with the natural environment of the Jameos to the point where it is hard to distinguish nature from design.



Fig.5 [*Jameos del Agua*] [online image] (n.d.)

Available at: <https://www.apartmentspuertodelcarmen.com/lanzarote/los-jameos-del-agua/>
[Accessed: 9th January 2024]

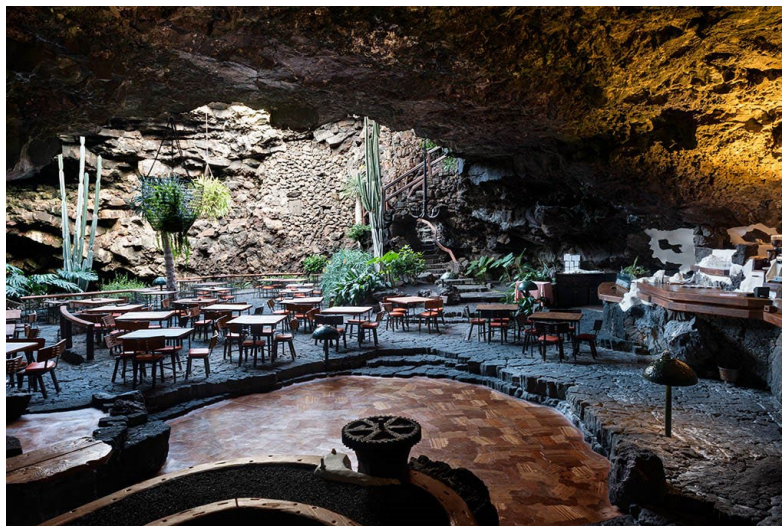


Fig.6 [*Jameos del Agua. Restaurant*] [online image] (n.d.)

Available at: <https://turismolanzarote.com/it/cosa-vedere/cact-lanzarote/jameos-del-agua/>
[Accessed: 9th January 2024]

***El Taro de Tahiche* (1968) (Fig.7-9)**

Upon his return to the island in 1966, César Manrique built a unique house for himself. Completed in 1968 two-storey house again perfectly blends in the natural landscape. For its bottom floor, the architect adapted five volcanic bubbles submerged in the field of lava, whilst the ground floor resembles typical local architecture with its 'blocky forms and smooth walls, rendered in white stucco, ... enlivened with quirky touches' such as a colourful mural by the entrance or a black flow of lava pouring in through a window (Lubell, 2005 p.128). Even in this early project Manrique already used all the features which will become his trademark in the future: the 'bright-white paths, water falling into jewel-like turquoise pools, giant cacti, and niches for sitting, all arranged in a curvy hippy style' what proves that he had a clear vision how the island's new developments should look like (Richardson, 2018 p.2). In 1988 he decided to move to another house he arranged for himself in Haria and implemented adaptation of the Tahiche house into a museum designated for his artworks and into the established in 1982 César Manrique Foundation headquarters, which was completed in 1992.



Fig.7 Fundación César Manrique (n.d.) [*El Taro de Tahiche. Volcano House*] [online image]
Available at: <https://fcmanrique.org/en/casas-museo-visitas/fundacion-cesar-manrique-tahiche/>
[Accessed: 9th January 2024]



Fig.8 Fundación César Manrique (n.d.) [*El Taro de Tahiche. Volcano House*] [online image]
 Available at: <https://fcmanrique.org/en/casas-museo-visitas/fundacion-cesar-manrique-tahiche/>
 [Accessed: 9th January 2024]



Fig.9 Fundación César Manrique (n.d.) [*El Taro de Tahiche. Volcano House*] [online image]
 Available at: <https://fcmanrique.org/en/casas-museo-visitas/fundacion-cesar-manrique-tahiche/>
 [Accessed: 9th January 2024]

***Mirador del Rio* (1973) (Fig.10)**

This unusual viewpoint is yet another example ‘of Manrique’s art-in-nature philosophy’ (Richardson, 2018 p.1). Placed within the Risco the Famara cliff in 1973, it provides breathtaking ‘views of neighbouring island La Graciosa and the Atlantic Ocean 475m below’ (Richardson, 2018 p.2). Its structure combines two domes, buried in the rock to blend in with the landscape and ‘to diminish the visual impact and making use of an old coastal artillery battery’ (turismolanzarote.com, 2019 para 5). They contain a restaurant with a futuristic oval-shaped window compared by Paul Richardson (2018, p.2) to ‘that of a 1960s spaceship.’



Fig.10 Wanderlustchloe.com (n.d.) [*Mirador del Rio*] [online image]
 Available at: <https://www.wanderlustchloe.com/mirador-del-rio-lanzarote/>
 [Accessed: 9th January 2024]

***Jardin de Cactus* (1991) (Fig.11)**

The last of César Manrique's works in Lanzarote, created in the years 1990 – 1991, the *Cactus Garden* (1991) turned a derelict land of the former Guatiza quarry into another place where the community and tourists alike can earn some memorable experiences (turismolanzarote.com, 2019). Regarding the rough, infertile environment of the island, with its sparse vegetation, it is especially important project as the area houses 450 distinct species of cactus, ferns, and succulents from five continents.



Fig.11 ALLARD SHAGER/GETTY IMAGES (n.d.) [*Jardín de Cactus*] [online image]
Available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/lanzarote-where-nature-meets-design-9nqv7w6ps>
[Accessed: 9th January 2024]

Impact and Legacy

César Manrique's life-long passion and his major contributions to Lanzarote are prominent to this day and are reflected in substantial number of projects, artworks, and installations scattered across the island. His legacy is permanent and continues to thrive through his Foundation and Centres of Art, Culture, and Tourism. Various artists from all over the world have a chance to utilise the space of his former studio for their projects. The cultural trail he created attracts millions of visitors and inspires contemporary architects such as Alvaro Siza or Jacques Herzog (Scarpa, 2021). Scarpa (2021, p. 88) emphasises that '[S]hortly after Manrique's death – and thanks to his direct involvement – Lanzarote received recognition from UNESCO for the balance between urban development and the environment.' He also argues that Manrique's projects massively impacted the island's economic growth as they attract annually similar numbers of visitors as the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao does, whilst the investment was only a fraction of the money spent on the Frank Gehry's Bilbao project (Scarpa, 2021). Manrique (quoted in Tendera, 2016 p.66) summarised his contribution to the island saying '[O]n Lanzarote, we have worked with utter

devotion, in close contact with its geology, understanding its composition and its volcanic essence, achieving the miracle of a new aesthetics, to create a greater capacity for art and integrate all its facets into an all-embracing symbiosis, which I have described as: LIFE-MAN-ART.’ His statement allows to believe that he accomplished his mission, and his dreams of making a utopia became true.

Conclusions

César Manrique’s love for his native island of Lanzarote, his philosophy and attempts to create an ideal place from his utopian dreams combined into a driving force for his passion. Along with his extraordinary vision, talent, and charisma it resulted in many successful interventions into the island’s challenging landscape designed not only without causing a damage, but also protecting and preserving local environment, identity, and authenticity. This article explored the architectural mission of this accomplished artist, thinker, and architect, it discussed his selected projects and their features, characteristic to the unique Manrique’s style, and how they perfectly blend with the traditional architecture of the island, serve local communities and tourists alike. It also argued that Manrique’s deep connection with nature and respect for environment had significant impact on his work, what places him among pioneers implementing ideas of sustainable architecture and environmental care in their projects. This paper also explained how, through relentless documentation and personal involvement in conversations, Manrique raised a lasting awareness of the unique value of Lanzarote’s cultural and architectonic heritage to its inhabitants. As Scarpa (2021, p.87) observes, the impact of Manrique’s philosophy and actions remains still relevant, and whilst his legacy for many years was appreciated mainly on Canary Islands, recently he has become ‘an inspiration for sustainable architectural and urban development, within an economy of means and respect for environmental values.’ César Manrique dreamed of a utopia and did not refrain from any effort to make his dream come true. The ‘genius loci’ of the island born from fire was his accomplice in this success.



Fig.5 [*Jameos del Agua*] [online image] (n.d.)

Available at: https://www.tuiexperiences.com/uk/spain/lanzarote/northern-lanzarote-tour-with-green-caves-and-jameos-del-agua-3/e_nov35-d_510-c_161/

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