

Landscapes of care
the emergence of landscapes of care in unstable territories



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VISUAL ESSAYS

Six Stones and a Plinth: Spanish Hórreos as Cultural Landscape

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Abstract

This visual essay looks into a typology of granaries that is common in Northern Spain: the Hórreo. It describes their genealogy, structural components, and current use in the Spanish province of Asturias. The essay seeks to give attention not only to their agricultural use but also to their striking visual appearance and its integration within the Asturian Landscape. It argues, following the words of archaeologist Richard Bradley, that the Hórreos have a monumental presence; as an offspring of prehistoric temples—where food surplus was divided by the priests—they are a relic of a time when agricultural production was ritualised, and are thus a reminder of the blurred distinction between the sacred and profane.

Key-words: Architecture, Landscape, Storage, Spain, Photography

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She lectured, participated in panels, and led workshops at various institutions, amongst them the CCA in Montreal, Harvard GSD, TU Delft, and the Universities of Syracuse, Porto, Aarhus, Rice, Carelton, and Aalto.

Her photographs have been exhibited in a number of exhibitions and publications, including the Venice Biennale, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, HKW in Berlin, The Rotterdam Biennale and the Seoul Biennale for urbanism. Her writings and reportages have been translated into German, French, Spanish, Russian and Portuguese; she has been published in several journals including the Economist, the AA Files, MIT's Thresholds, Plat Journal, The Guardian, Apollo Magazine, The Architects' Journal, and the Architectural Review.

Meandering through the Spanish province of Asturias, one cannot ignore a unique agricultural typology: the four-post granaries, or *Hórreos*. From Latin *Hordeum* ("barley"), these striking granaries have been in continuous use since at least the 13th century. Though varied in colour, scale, and materiality, the store-houses share a typological logic and an iconic shape: a raised rectangular volume topped with a pitched roof, supported by four or six heavy stone posts which isolate the yield from humidity and rodents.



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Hórreos are built of two distinct parts. The base is often made of hand-carved limestone posts (*Pegoyos*) topped with disk-shaped elements (*Muela*) upon which four square wooden beams (*Trabes*) are positioned to support the storehouse. The main part of the Hórreo, the storehouse itself, is usually made of chestnut wood, topped with a pitched roof made of slate, straw, or tiles. It is accessed via a detached stone staircase (*Subidoria*) that leads to an exterior balcony (or a *corredor*) that is also used to dry products such as garlic, onion, and corn.

The Asturian Hórreos (numbered at 10,000) and their counterparts around the Iberian peninsula are viewed by scholars as the genealogical successor to the European *four-poster* (*Speicher* in German), a type of timber granary common in Bronze and Iron Age Europe (mostly found in Germany and Britain). In the Iberian peninsula, however, it is likely that they date to the late Mediaeval period, where they were developed following the introduction of new crops (such as corn) by incoming colonisers.¹

¹ Richard Bradley, *Ritual and Domestic Life in Prehistoric Europe*, 5



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In *Ritual and Domestic Life in Prehistoric Europe* (2005) archaeologist Richard Bradley argues that while scholars of prehistory tend to study the Horreos in the context of an agricultural economy, they give “too little thought to the visual impact of such structures and need to consider their place in the local topography and their impact on the people living among them.”² Indeed, despite their widespread existence, little has been written about the architectural expression of these structures; their position within the landscape and their affective power over society.

² *Idem, Ibidem.*





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Hórreos are built above gardens and farms, attached to houses, raised on platforms in a courtyard enclosure or erected at the side of the road or in a village centre. Oftentimes, as can be seen in the photos above, the Hórreos have a strong visual presence to the point that they are sometimes more prominent and placed on a higher platform than the house to which they belong and even the town's church. As such, Bradley argues "they are not just agricultural buildings; they are also monuments."³ The monumentality of the Hórreos is grounded not only in the prominence of their visual expression, but in their key symbolic and practical role in an agricultural economy focused on individual survival and longevity. As a structure used to store crops, Hórreos are tied to cycles of agricultural production—associated with notions of abundance and scarcity, and also with the annual calendar of religious rituals which imbue them with particular cultural meaning.⁴ In that sense, the Hórreos embody two categories that seem to be mutually exclusive: the sacred and the profane.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ *Ibidem*, 6



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Hórreos are then not only an index of the local economy or a token of architectural currency but a reflection of a particular way of life, an integral part of the Asturian topography. *Topography*, (literally 'place description') is understood here as the three-dimensional formation of the terrain, blurring figure and ground in order to articulate the natural and the cultural. As Denis Cosgrove argues in *Social Formation and the Symbolic Landscape* (1984), landscape is an ideological construct; a way of offering human control over the natural world.⁵ By eliminating the distinction between god-made and man-made, seeing the world through the perception of landscape allows various elements to merge into a single view that produces an affective response. These photos portray the Hórreos as a signifier of agricultural labour and ritual, a part of the landscape as much as the sea, mountains, and the population of Asturias.

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Online slideshow from The Department of Technology, IES Aramo in Oviedo, Asturias, <https://es.slideshare.net/miguelssm/asturian-horreos-34457929>

⁵ Denis Cosgrove, *Social formation and the Symbolic Landscape*, 11.

