

## An Open Letter to UNESCO regarding the Puerta Triana project (“Pelli Tower”)

Dear UNESCO members,

In the past few days, an UNESCO delegation, headed by Mr. José Aguiar and Mrs. Elvira Petroncelli, has been visiting Seville to evaluate the purported impact of the Puerta Triana project on the three Sevillian sites on the World Heritage List: the Cathedral (with its Giralda tower), the Alcázar and the Archive of the Indies. We would respectfully like to address you in order to provide you with some more information on this subject which might be helpful to make a more informed decision, and to perhaps set a few things straight.

First, a word of presentation. *sevillasemueve* (“Seville moves”, styled *SEm*) is a legally constituted association which sprang from some of the more active members of the *Sevilla21.com* forums, a teeming online community on all things Seville with thousands of active members. We founded *sevillasemueve* almost three years ago in order to have a legitimate organization to, essentially, voice the majority opinion of the forum users, which we felt was nowhere near well represented in the local media and political arena. Although urban planning, mobility and architecture are perhaps the most prominent subjects on the Sevilla21 forums –and, thus, are among our core areas of activity– we are also interested in preserving and promoting the cultural and urban heritage of Seville, in fostering a smart and forward-looking economic development, and in doing so in a sustainable and eco-friendly way.

It is true that we do not have the resources –or clout– that some other organizations in Seville do. We do not have a boatload of money, friendly media groups willing to voice our every message, or influence in political circles. All we have is our enthusiasm. But of that we have plenty, which has allowed us to build somewhat of a name for ourselves in the past three years. We have actively participated in the most important urban debates, in

areas such as the subway network, the mobility policy in the city, the preservation of heritage sites (such as the *Templo de San Onofre*) or the new architectural developments in Seville. We have been invited to take part in initiatives such as the European Mobility Week or the Seville 2019-2022 Civic Initiative, we have been routinely featured in local and even national media, and we have a strong presence in social networks such as Twitter. In short, the only ones who ignore our existence are those who willingly do so.

It is, thus, regrettable that nobody thought it appropriate to invite us to the meeting which the UNESCO delegation held with a host of civic organizations. More so because it is well known that we give voice to a large number of Sevillians, who are in favor of the Puerta Triana project and who do not feel that it threatens our rich heritage. We would rather not pass judgment on what has caused the organizers of the meeting not to invite us; however, we do feel that it is important for the UNESCO members to get a balanced view of the picture.

There are four main areas in which we feel that the UNESCO members could benefit from a different point of view: the support (or lack thereof) of the citizens to the project; the effect on the World Heritage Sites of the 178m high tower which is part of the project; the questionable validity and nature of some arguments given by opponents to the project; and the blatant manipulation of the UNESCO name and good will by those in the *Tumbala* platform. We will expand on those four points below.

### **First: Is there a significant civic opposition to the project?**

Given that all the civic entities that were invited are staunchly against the project, it would be natural for the UNESCO representatives to assume that there is a large majority of citizens opposing the César Pelli building. However, the reality is that no study supports that view. In fact, even discounting circumstantial sources such as online polls (which routinely show support for the project), studies such as the Barómetro Antares –a periodic evaluation of the Sevillian *zeitgeist*– suggest that there is probably a slight majority in favor of the project or, at least, that the jury is still out.

Furthermore, and even though perceived damage to our heritage is a valid reason to oppose the project, so are several others, such as purely aesthetic reasons. Thus, it is not possible to infer that all the opposition to the project stems from a perceived damage to the three World Heritage Sites. And, to advance a point which we will be making a few more times, we understand that the UNESCO recommendations will only deal with direct or indirect damage to the Cathedral, Alcázar or Archive of the Indies, whereas other reasons to oppose the project, valid or not, fall outside its scope.

It should be kept in mind that, as anybody with some experience as a Sevillian citizen can attest, one of the peculiarities of our beloved city is that “traditionalist” forces are given much more media exposure than the “modernist” thinkers. This unfortunate state of affairs, of which our exclusion from the UNESCO meeting is yet another proof, may lead onlookers to believe the civic opinion to be much more uniform than it really is.

## **Second: Does the Puerto Triana tower damage the integrity of the World Heritage Sites?**

We can divide this question in two, given that, due to the distance between the tower and the World Heritage Sites, the only possible influence of the tower in them would be due to visual interference. First, will the tower impair the contemplation of the monuments on their vicinity? Second, will the tower damage any of the typical vistas involving the World Heritage Sites?

There is an easy answer to the first question, and it is **no**. There is no point in the vicinity of the monuments on which the tower appears into view, let alone influence them negatively. The structure of the Seville city center, with narrow streets and few open expanses, makes it impossible to see the tower from any place near the monuments. Not even from the Patio de Banderas, the largest open plaza near the monuments, would an observer be able to see the tower.

One can also include in this question whether it will be possible to see the tower from within the monuments themselves. Of course, it will be visible from atop the Giralda tower,

as is all the rest of the city; in fact, it will be well integrated in the more modern architecture of Cartuja'93, the former Expo'92 site. Other than that, no other publicly accessible places will have the tower in view. It will not even be visible from the Grotesques Gallery of the Alcázar, which has the most favorable configuration (it is elevated from the floor level and has a long distance to the nearest wall in the direction of the tower, both factors which favor it being visible). Claiming otherwise, as the local chapter of ICOMOS has sometimes done, is untrue, unless they take the Alcázar roof (which is not publicly accessible, and probably will not be any time soon) as their vantage point. We will be happy to support this affirmation.

With regards to the second question, the possible influence of the tower in panoramic views of the monuments, let us first mention that only the Giralda and the Cathedral are visible from outside the vicinity of the monuments, and that the classic Giralda view from a distance is that taken from the West, where the two most important observation areas are located.

The first observation area is the river front of Triana, across from the city centre. The most typical view of those –and perhaps of the whole of Seville– is that from Betis Street or the Triana Bridge, which involves the Cathedral and Giralda, the Maestranza bullring, the Golden Tower and a few other known monuments. Further north, by Paseo de la O, the Triana bridge enters the picture; further South, near Plaza de Cuba, some other monuments, such as the San Telmo Palace, add to the view. From this area, the Puerto Triana tower is directly behind the observer. Thus, it can be inferred that no damage to the World Heritage Sites exists.

The second typical view is that from the Aljarafe countryside, across the live river, as seen from San Juan de Aznalfarache. This view has been immortalized in countless works of art, perhaps the most known of which is the *View of Seville*, a 17th century Flemish painting which pictures the Seville of the Golden Age and which was recently acquired by a well-known Sevillian cultural foundation for a presumably steep price. The area on which the tower will be located is well outside the scope of the painting. Again, there is no damage to the World Heritage Site.

Of course, given a map and some patience, it is always possible to find a particular view in which the Giralda and the Cajasol Tower are both visible. However, no sane person would have ever defended that those views were anywhere near “classical” views of the city, given that they were already profoundly affected by, for instance, the modern architecture of Cartuja'93, or the rather dull and functional architecture of eastward areas such as Nervión. Claiming now that they are is a rather opportunistic stance to take.

To put it in somewhat humorous terms, postcard makers have nothing to worry about, even if all their archives are destroyed: the tower will not even remotely appear in any of the beautiful photos of the city they routinely use.

**Third: Are all the arguments used by the opponents to the project relevant, or even correct?**

We have seen a whole host of reasons given by opponents of the project which are not directly related to its effect on the World Heritage Sites. Some of them are rather picturesque, such as the supposed irregularities of the building license (which has been repeatedly confirmed as correct by legal and political authorities), speculative intent on the part of the promoters (even though the economic situation does not exactly favor getting rich quick with buildings), and even disruptions to air traffic (which have been denied by the Spanish aerial navigation authority, as was plainly obvious to anybody with basic knowledge of the highest points in Seville and a trace of common sense).

We will try to address some of the most prominent criticisms below, but before that, we would like to reiterate an earlier point: **Issues other than those dealing with the affection, direct or indirect, of the project in the World Heritage Sites should not influence the UNESCO recommendations.** It is dangerous for UNESCO to become entangled in side discussions which have little or no bearing on the monumental sites. We do acknowledge that action has to be taken to ensure a good functional insertion of the tower in the city structure. But those actions are already planned and called for, and have nothing to do with the World Heritage monuments.

- ***“Once built, the tower will create a chaotic situation due to traffic.”*** We acknowledge –and have repeatedly voiced our exigences in this regard– that the tower will need a powerful transportation infrastructure to make it easily reachable and to avoid gridlocks in the area, which is near one of the most important entries to Seville. However, this is not a cultural heritage issue, but an urban planning issue; in fact, were the same number of offices built in low-rise buildings instead of in the tower, the same problems would still exist. It should be noted that, in the near future, the area is planned to be one of the better connected points in Seville, with two subway lines and commuter rail reaching Puerta Triana. Since it will still be a few years until the complex is operating at full capacity, there is time to build that infrastructure; and, of course, we will continue pushing for it at every occasion we get.
- ***“There is no need for more office space in Seville; there are plenty of empty offices.”*** Again, this is a city planning issue, not a heritage issue. But this argument is akin to opposing the building of a five-star hotel in a city because there are already numerous bed&breakfasts available. The reality is that Seville lacks flagship office space of the type that the complex will provide; in fact, that is a key factor for Cajasol, the project promoter, since it ensures its economic viability. By the way, it is difficult to include both this and the former argument in a coherent argumentative body: Either the tower is full and brings on traffic problems, or it is empty and goes unsold. Both can not happen at the same time.
- ***“The complex is an ecological/economic/social disaster”.*** Without elaborating more deeply in the rationale for high-rise building, and again reiterating that this is not a heritage problem, we would like to note that there is an economic study backing the project, that the tower has been evaluated for energetic efficiency and awarded the highest level (A+), and that the commercial part of the project will undoubtedly infuse more life in the Cartuja'93 area, which is nowadays somewhat of a ghost town outside office hours. Besides, and anecdotal as it may be, the observation deck at the top of the tower will be open to the public and will, no doubt, provide breathtaking views of the Seville heritage.

- ***“The tower will ruin the typical views of Seville.”*** We already explained above that there will be no real influence in the views of Seville involving the World Heritage sites. The influence on other “typical” views is rather limited, if any. The tower will essentially be invisible from within the historic centre because of its urban structure. Even near the river –which, because of its alignment with the Puerta Triana site, will provide impressive views of the building–, it is rather difficult to find any monument which will be credibly affected by the tower. The Cartuja Monastery is separated enough from the site of the tower to keep its typical views (from the Pasarela de la Cartuja and from the main monastery gate) intact; with regards to the Golden Tower, even by making an effort to include both it and the Puerta Triana tower in the same picture (which would not exactly be the “typical” view), the latitude between them is large enough (and the visual size of the Puerta Triana tower is modest enough) to not distort the contemplation of the monument.

While we are talking of views, we would like to call your attention to the manipulative nature of most, if not all, of the photo-compositions that the opponents to the project have been using to promote their views. Seville is a rather flat city, which makes it all the more easy to calculate the apparent size of the tower from any point of interest. Given the amount of educated people among the opponents of the project, one would expect them to be able to use a simple Rule of Three effectively. But even the most summary check reveals that the size and height of the tower is routinely, and grossly, exaggerated in the images that *Tumbala* and others have been flooding the city with.

We have correctly calculated views and comparisons with the *Tumbala* ones; they are in our website, and we will be happy to provide them. But you do not have to believe us; just do the math yourself. We will, however, mention an example: There is an image in the header of one of the most active websites against the project in which the tower is drawn as a background to the Plaza de España building, besides one of its spires. Should the *Tumbala* image be correct, **the tower would be about 420 m high**, which would place it among the tallest buildings in the world and comfortably beat the yet unfinished Shard London Bridge (310 m) for the title of highest skyscraper in Europe. (A correct calculation reveals that just a little part of the tower would barely be visible between the trees). Other

*Tumbala* "simulations" consistently put the tower above or near 300 m of height, well over 100 m over its correct height. We find it difficult to assume good faith in these gross misrepresentations.

#### **Fourth: Is there a hidden agenda in pursuing the UNESCO involvement?**

Until now, we have tried to be as objective as possible in our exposition. But there is a point in which we are forced to speculate, although we do think that our suspicions are well backed by evidence. To put it simply, we strongly suspect that the local lobbies are trying to involve UNESCO not out of sincere concern for the World Heritage Sites, but simply as a means of pressure to kill the project.

To begin with, we would like to say that we respect each and every opinion regarding the project, both for and against it. We do not expect to convince everyone, nor to be in possession of the ultimate truth. Up to this point we have just detailed, in good faith, why we think that the project will not affect the World Heritage Sites; we are also convinced that it will not affect our other heritage and that it will be good for the city in several other accounts, but we have not included these arguments here since we do not feel that this is the place for that kind of discussion. We love Seville and would find it impossible to defend the project if we were not completely convinced of that it will add much, and subtract nothing, to the city. But, of course, everybody is entitled to its own opinion.

However, to reiterate for a third and final time, we strongly feel that UNESCO should restrict its evaluation to the influence of the project on the World Heritage Sites. In much the same way as we expect UNESCO to be exhaustive and serious in its assessment of the possible damage to the World Heritage Sites, we also expect UNESCO not to enter into other arguments which bear little or no relevance to it. Not because we feel they are damaging to our cause –we are more than ready to discuss all points that the opponents to the project make–, but because they fall outside of the scope of the stated UNESCO labor.

And, while we do not doubt the professionalism and impartiality of the UNESCO members,

we do have our reservations about several members of the local ICOMOS chapter, who are prominent opponents to the project and leaders of the *Tumbala* platform. As we stated before, it is difficult to assume good will when the photo-compositions of the tower provided by *Tumbala* are off by more than 200%; when the discussions which should supposedly deal with the heritage sites are time and again distorted to insert spurious and unrelated arguments; when the ICOMOS report leaked to the press contained a lot of noise on why their creators did not like the project, but very scarce substance on what its affection to the World Heritage Sites is (as an exercise, try and count how many times the Archive of the Indies is mentioned... next to none); when even the Mayor himself spreads misinformation (he claimed in his Twitter account that the whole of Seville, as opposed to the three well-known monuments, was a World Heritage Site); when, in conclusion, we see *Tumbala* trying to leverage its ties to UNESCO to involve it, not in the protection of the World Heritage Sites, but in the political disputes which surround the project.

UNESCO can not afford to entangle itself in these local power struggles. It falls outside the UNESCO mission and areas of expertise, it casts UNESCO in a bad light, and it opens the door to many more complications that it solves. Of course, the project can and should be criticized by anyone with a solid point; it has had its share of ups and downs, has spawned many an argument within the city, and the buzz around it will not die down any time soon. We are not claiming otherwise. But that is a political battle, and it should be settled on political terms. In short, we just expect UNESCO to do its job –evaluating the project and ensuring that it does not negatively affect the three World Heritage Sites– while allowing us, the civic and political forces within the city, to do ours within a playing field which is level for both sides.

We thank you for taking the time to read this document, and are available for any and all clarifications and further information you might need.

Yours sincerely,

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President of *sevillasemueve*