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Water And Culture: The Canal de Isabel II Elevated Reservoir

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*Roque Gistau
Maria Fuentes*

WATER AND

CULTURE:

The Canal de

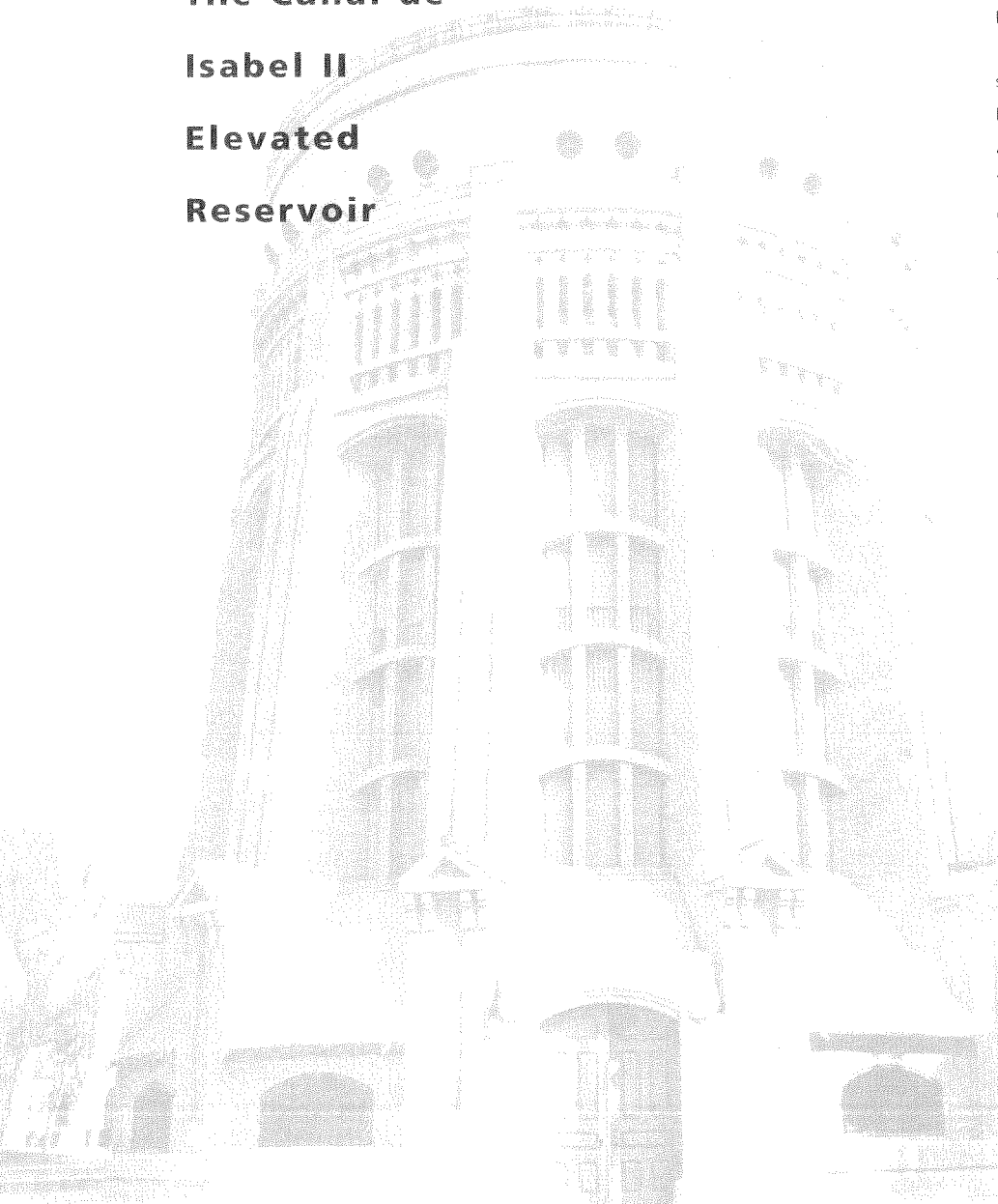
Isabel II

Elevated

Reservoir

Until 1851 the city of Madrid was supplied with water from underground aquifers. In that year the Canal de Isabel II, the company responsible for bringing water to the Spanish capital, was created. Between 1907 and 1911, the company built the First Elevated Reservoir (designed by Diego Martín Montalvo, Luis Moya and Ramón Aguinaga), which supplied water to the high points of the city. By 1952, however, the reservoir was obsolete, as new infrastructure and technology for storing and distributing water was put in place, and it was taken out of service.

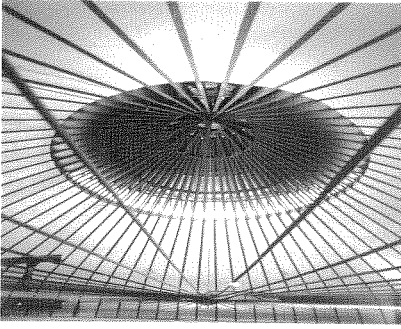
Elevated reservoirs traditionally have been subjected to various kinds of camouflage. Their basic cylindrical shape has been transformed into a fortified tower, as in Perpignan; a castle, as in York; or a lighthouse, as in Wassemar. But the Canal's elevated reservoir *looks like* a reservoir and is valuable evidence of early twentieth-century industrial engineering in Madrid.



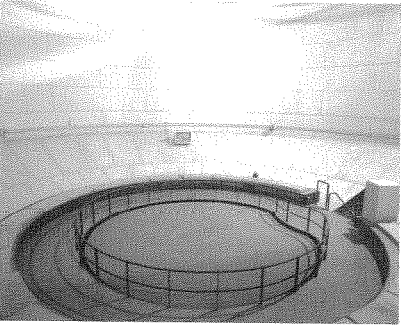
The Canal de Isabel II elevated reservoir, after conversion into a gallery.

Photos by M. Angel Gomez, courtesy Canal de Isabel II.

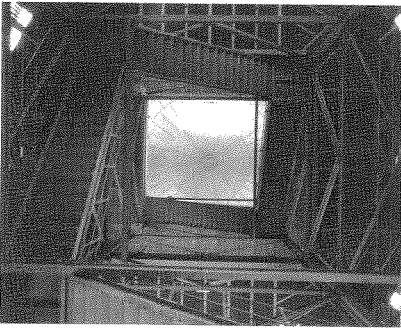
Tower section, before the conversion.



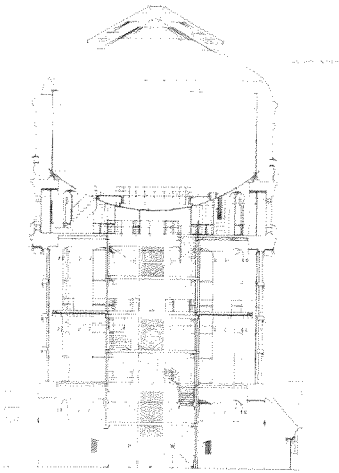
Ceiling of gallery space within the water tank.



Gallery space within the water tank.



View up stairwell to the bottom of the water tank.



Tower section, after the conversion.

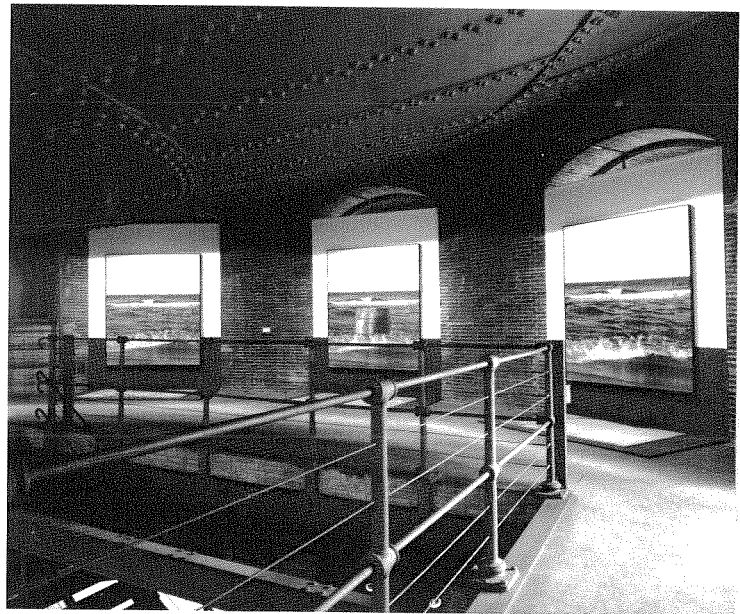
In 1986 the reservoir was restored and converted into an exhibition hall by Canal de Isabel II and architects Antonio Lopera Arazala and Javier Alau Massa. The project sought to maintain the original characteristics of the reservoir and to introduce the minimum necessary modern systems, such as air conditioning, lighting, an elevator and communications equipment, necessary to support the new use.

An adjacent building, which had housed the elevator station that pumped the water, also was preserved and converted into offices. An auxiliary pavilion was constructed to house complementary services and facilities that were difficult to fit inside the reservoir. And the reservoir's immediate surroundings, including the landscape, also were restored. These projects, along with four modern office blocks, an underground reservoir and spacious gardens, constitute the central offices of Canal de Isabel II.

The reservoir, approximately 120 feet tall, is constructed from brick and steel. Its polygonal shape is derived from the position of the radial brick buttresses that support the water tank, which is covered by a decorative cupola. The tank is supported on a brick hoop at the base of the crown and by a metal structural turret. The turret also houses a stairway, which provides access to the exterior of the bottom of the tank.

(An elevator, installed between two of the buttresses, also provides access to this level.) A passage cut through one of the buttresses provided access for preservation work in the gap between the interior wall of the cupola and the exterior wall of the water tank. Housed within this ambulatory is a vertical metal stairway that leads to the gallery in the center of the tank.

Today the gallery is an important part of Madrid's cultural life; the work of artists like Salvador Dali, Alex Webb, Inge Morath and Elliot Erwitt has been exhibited there. This year, in which the Spanish capital has been chosen as the "Cultural Capital of Europe," the gallery will house exhibitions from other European capitals, such as Athens, Paris and Berlin.



Gallery in space directly beneath the water tank.