

## **BACKDROPS AND MINIATURES: THE OTHER MADRID BUILT BY ALMODÓVAR**

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"Visit Almodóvar's Madrid. If there were an Oscar for best location, Pedro Almodóvar's Madrid would be a firm favorite. Now film fans can tour the director's hot spot." This is the start of a Web page but, even though it sounds odd, it is not the advertisement of a travel agency, but of a language school<sup>1</sup> that offers its participants "visit Almodóvar's most famous movie locations and experience the city he portrays. You will participate in a tour of the director's favorite haunts: viewing three of his movies from different periods and partaking in a subsequent discussion of the film with the expert."

Evidently Madrid, as mentioned in the previously cited ad, is the city the director portrays and much has written about this symbiosis between the director and the capital of Spain.<sup>2</sup> Before continuing it is necessary to state something evident; when a director chooses to frame a part of a city, he is dissecting it while at the same time constructing a different reality. For example, the Barrio de la Concepción in *¡Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?* (1984) becomes an interpretation the director makes of this suburb.

A fundamental interpretation for this same city, as Giuliana Bruno states:

the image of the city is no more than a complexity of all the mental projections that also include all we have read, all that we have seen in photographs, in art, and in film. For that reason it does no good to speak of geography without speaking of the complexity of the geography of the representation, and I think

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<sup>1</sup> Plus abroad, [http://www.plusabroad.com/id\\_en/travel-spain/almodovar-madird.php](http://www.plusabroad.com/id_en/travel-spain/almodovar-madird.php). This business is wrong when they say that part of *Matador* was filmed on the Aqueduct in Segovia, being benign it's supposed quite possibly they confused it with the Viaduct of Madrid.

<sup>2</sup> The author of this article is finalizing with Jesus Robles and exhaustive Guide of Madrid of Pedro Almodóvar

that the visual arts always have a very important role in the configuration of places, in the transformation of spaces in places.<sup>3</sup>

However, this article will deal with something even more fictitious about Madrid, about that Madrid which has only some similarities with the one which a visitor can travel to, and even travel with, the characters of Almodóvar. That is a Madrid reordered and constructed by the director with cinematographic instruments, mock-ups, and above all else, a formidable imagination.

### Madrid as Background

The Spanish word for translating backdrops is "forillos," a term that comes from theater and is used to designate those curtains or mock-ups used to simulate reality used in the background, behind the backdrops, almost always painted or with a photograph made to look like a natural or urban landscape. In movies they are used when filmed in the studio, placing them for example behind open windows while it is assumed that the actors are in the interior of a construction. There are two films of Pedro Almodóvar where Madrid is reproduced thanks to backings in which painted surface maps are mixed with other tri-dimensionals. Chronologically the first is *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (1988), located in a building where Pepa (Carmen Maura), speaks with a real estate agent (Agustín Almodóvar) she meets on the street Montalbán 7, that is exactly in the building located on that street where the characters are coming and going. The Madrid seen from the balcony of this penthouse is a great background made with two backdrops,<sup>3</sup> one for daytime and the other for nighttime scenes, representing the culmination from left to right of the buildings Bank Vitalicio, Bank of Bilbao,<sup>4</sup> the Metropolis and at the end, the Telefonica,<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> A part of these two backdrops were exhibited in *Construtores de quimeras*, the celebrated exhibition in the Centro cultural Conde Duque in 1999, whose commissioners were Elena Cervera and the author of this article.

<sup>4</sup> In whose terrace, where a spectacular sculpture is found of a car kicked by three horses, the final scenes were filmed of *La Comunidad* (Álex de la Iglesia, 2000).

a property emblematic of the capital, and that has at the summit of its tower a great clock, illuminated at night, which has been labeled as “pupila roja” red student<sup>6</sup>.

Taking into account this urban landscape the building must be on Calle Alcalá more or less, in number 42, the place occupied by the Circle of Fine Arts building, and not on Calle Montalbán which you find near Retiro Park a distance of approximately a half kilometer. This distance is not important for the credibility of the film, but it would be noteworthy if chosen as the façade of a building from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The building is used as housing for people with high purchasing power, and for what might be the exterior image of the home of the protagonist, who in this period, enjoys the privileged position of living in this notable already mentioned edifice, of which will be said shortly. At the end of the film, already night, Pepa and Marisa (Rosy de Palma) are seated, while the camera frames them from the back, looking at the urban landscape. Lupe is heard singing *Pure theater*, the artificiality becomes more highlighted when she sings “The same as on a stage [...] lo tuyo es puro teatro”. The scene is that of a fake, upscale penthouse, which can be considered as a reproduction of Madrid.

The second film is *Kika* (1993), whose protagonist (Verónica Forqué) is a factory worker, aspirant actress, who lives in a flat decorated with brilliantly colored objects and furniture by famous designers. From the balcony of her apartment various buildings can be seen, the most recognizable are the Torre Europa and the Torre Picasso, situated in the proximity of the Azca complex, which has already appeared in *Pepa, Luci, Bom y las otras chicas del montón* (1980), a more recently urbanized area than the Gran Vía and the Calle Alcalá of *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*. In those years the towers cited formed part of the newest architecture of Madrid, and in fact, the Picasso was the tallest building in Spain since its construction in 1988 until 2007. This modernity is reflected in the interior of the apartment and even with the attitudes and the professions of the characters.

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<sup>5</sup> It is well known that Almodóvar worked at the C.T.N.E. (Compañía Telefónica Nacional de España) owner of this building.

<sup>6</sup> Luis Fernández Cifuentes, “Mujeres, nervios, Madrid: Almodóvar en la gran ciudad”, *Revista de la Universidad de México*, n<sup>o</sup> 47 (enero de 2008), 33.

The backdrops of the films mentioned<sup>7</sup> simulate Madrid, but there are others more abstract than those appearing in Almodóvar's film which do not attempt to recreate buildings constructed from reality.

In *Kika*, there are other representations of the city. As the background of the reality show of Andrea Caracortada (Victoria Abril), Almodóvar has declared "the set is made with a type of skyline". At first, I asked for photos of an authentic skyline. But, at first, I didn't like the photos as they were because I wanted them to have volume. Also I wanted Andrea to be as tall as the buildings, as if she were some kind of King Kong; it was a perfect idea for this character. When I found myself with the problem of a horizon of buildings in three dimensions I changed my idea, even though I liked Andrea as King Kong between the buildings. I continued with the idea of the skyline but made a base of the panels with those that were constructed for the set, dirty and destroyed panels, in really bad shape, shown on the backside, not on the part that had been painted but by the part where it is the wood structure. I continued getting the sensation of a city skyline but coming from behind the buildings. I had an interest on a conceptual level that the sets were all made from demolished elements. However, at the time, everything turned out very sophisticated. The floor of the set is asphalt from the street, broken with patches like you usually see in Madrid. Also there are two elements of the city that I love, they are two cranes in the city that are always renovating, destroying and reconstructing at the same time. Anyway, the cranes close out the set and convert it into a theater scene".<sup>8</sup> In the film the cranes are hardly seen and even with two metal columns that support part of the structure of the theater, it does not lose the illusion of a rundown urban space, dark and under constant construction, like it usually is in Madrid.

The director has said:

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<sup>7</sup> The art director Antxón Gómez commented to the author of this article (Alicante 14 de mayo de 2008) that he constructed the backdrops for the apartment of the protagonist of *Carne trémula*, but it can hardly be seen in the movie.

<sup>8</sup> Frédéric Strauss, Pedro Almodovar: conversations avec Frédéric Strauss, Éditions de l'Étoile, Cahiers du Cinéma, Paris, 1994 (trad. Esp. : Pedro Almodóvar, un cine visceral, El País, Santillana, Madrid, 1995, p. 156).

I like the sets as they are, I like the set as representation, then I had to make real efforts in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* not to appear to show the limits of that desire for the set and what was behind it, but I felt the real necessity to show it. When I was filming the picture, in order to give free rein to that desire to show the set as a set and represent it as it was, I wrote a story that would occur within a studio within the set and where I could show the back of the set.<sup>9</sup>

From this idea surfaced *iAtame!*. One of its initial sequences happens in the cinematographic studio where several photographic backings were piled up and looked like the Tower of Madrid and other nearby building. Máximo Espejo, director of the film who is shooting the actress Marina Osorio (Victoria Abril) walked in front of them. In another later sequence, Antonio Banderas (Ricki) appears between the backings and hides, almost changing it into a gigantic being out of scale, like King Kong Almodóvar mentioned, it is filmed as a reduced city, formed only by façade planes, where someone like him, someone good but going crazy, can't have their own place. It is curious that one of the public images most repeated from *Kika* is the director's image, recorded with a video camera between the backings of an apartment building, of the before mentioned character, which he himself converted into another giant being filmed in his beloved city, Madrid.

#### Miniature Madrid

Returning to *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, his initial plan shows a part of an insubstantial building of several floors, with three cars out front, and behind are the leaves of a palm tree. After the light is slowly raised, the spectator immediately discovers it's a model. In the following shot, chickens and a duck move between various objects, while the illumination is intensifying, then the spectator notes that the sun is rising, and the light situated behind the mock up is an interior shot of the sun appearing to be ascending. Almodóvar has stated about this shot that:

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<sup>9</sup> Frédéric Strauss, Op. cit., 72.

what I wanted was to begin the film with a model of the building where Pepa lived, giving the impression that the building with the sun as it entered through the window and illuminated the model was real. After, the camera went toward the bed where we saw Pepa sleeping, and we saw that it looked like a model, that the building was nothing but artificial. I remember that if I wanted to unite all that to make it work I would have to break it up. For the most part the effect disappeared and I was really frustrated".<sup>10</sup>

In the end the model couldn't be that of the building where the protagonist lived. In another later sequence, it will be discovered that this backdrop, seen in the initial shot, is located over a ledge in the interior of Pepa's apartment, and it is from a trivial building of sixteen floors with little architectural interest. This simulated sunrise and the model, also served the director in order to plant from the beginning the artificiality of the same movie and the way in which they moved the lives of their characters.

To increase that feeling, the former sequence is introduced with Pepa in the real estate office,<sup>11</sup> which begins with the employee sticking the figure of Captain America on a mock up that looks like an enormous unnoticeable development, behind which there is a large photograph, almost a backing, of a landscape on the periphery with a city in the background. Between the buildings of the mockup appears the protagonist, causing a curious visual clash to the scale, like Ricki made in the before mentioned sequence. In the following shot the characters sit down on both sides of a table on which there are other models, between them one of the well known chair *Red Blue* created by Gerrit Rietveld in 1918 and another, not very accurate, nor very well made, of the Edificio España in Madrid.

In regard to the chair, it represents the interest that the director has always had in furnishings of the vanguardia, as Capella and Larrea write, "the objects make up the set, a meticulously detailed background which simply expresses communicative intention, showing that aesthetic

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<sup>10</sup> Frédéric Strauss. Op. cit., 94).

<sup>11</sup> Filmed at the notable Inmobiliaria Urbis.

concern and sensibility are not incompatible with the quality of the plot."<sup>12</sup>

In his movies can be seen the cardboard armchair *Wiggle* created by Frank O. Gehry in *Átame* and in Pepa's penthouse the chair *Wassily* (1925) by Marcel Breuer, but perhaps the space most exceptional and multicolored is the apartment of Kika in which, between other furniture there are four *Sandows* (1928) chairs by René Herbst, the sofa *Marshmallow* (1956) by George Nelson, a bookcase, by Ettore Sottsass, a chest of drawers from the U.S American Lyn Godley – Lloyd Schwan, two chairs *Arianna* (1992) by Rodolfo Dordoni, a chair and a red sideboard *Singapur* by Antoni Casadeuís,<sup>13</sup> lamps by Jean Royere and Robert Louis, as well as, curtains by Céasar Manrique, sheets by Sybilla, a bedspread by Ralph Lauren, and furniture created by Almodovar himself, by members of the art department like Ferderico G. Cambero and Alain Baineee and even a table by José Maria Sánchez, blacksmith and chauffeur of the director.<sup>14</sup> The majority of this furniture could be seen for real, forming part of the exposition *Kika's Furniture*<sup>15</sup> held at a notable furniture design store. The curious thing is that a large part of this furniture was Almodóvar's own, and in order to be able to organize the exposition, the director had to take advantage of his stay in the United States because his house was practically without furniture. Returning to the sequence in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, el Edificio España<sup>16</sup> is not chosen by chance, but because it has always been important in the urban physiognomy of the capital. It was the tallest in

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<sup>12</sup> Juli Capella and Quim Larrea, "Dramatics Objects," *El segle del cinema*, Centre de Cultura Contemporànea de Barcelona, Barcelona, 1995, 251.

<sup>13</sup> This designer had already loaned six pieces of his furniture for *Tacones lejanos* (1991).

<sup>14</sup> "Almodóvar: Los decorados de *Kika*. Juegos de damas", *Elle*, nº 33, (octubre de 1993), 70.

<sup>15</sup> Inaugurated the April, 28 1994 in BD Ediciones de Diseño de Madrid (Calle Villanueva,5) it was assembled by the recognized architect Elías Torres.

<sup>16</sup> Completed by the architects Joaquín and Julián Otamendi in 1953, living in it among others, were Luis Buñuel and Ava Gardner.

the country between 1953 and 1957, until the Torre de Madrid<sup>17</sup> was built, which at its time was also the tallest in Europe until 1967 and of Spain until 1988. Both became the symbol of “modernity” during the time of Franco.

Another symbol of Franco’s modernity was the Barajas Airport, where in *Tacones lejanos* (1991) Rebeca (Victoria Abril) is waiting for her mother and passes behind a model of the same airport, near where a café is really located in this terminal. A game is provoked in which the reflections in the window of a display case covered in glass is behind the woman but appears to put her in the display case, reflecting her uncertainty and consternation.

Almodóvar has employed this aerodrome<sup>18</sup> in several of his films, *Laberinto de pasiones* (1982) and *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* were ended there, and Marco Zuluaga (Darío Grandinetti) is seen leaving the terminal and catching a taxi in *Hable con ella* (2001). The airport like the train station<sup>19</sup> is a point of contact for Madrid with the rest of the world and for those coming from the outside, while at the same time serving for some characters running from the mirror, a place to change the course of their lives.

The most meaningful scale model of Almodovar’s cinema appears in *Kika*, in a shot inside the photography studio of Ramón (Alex Casanovas), partner of the protagonist, in which between he and the writer Nicholas Pierce (Peter Coyote) are two raised backdrops behind a board on which there are some models of Madrid buildings. Those buildings are not chosen by chance, but because they are icons of the Capital. Beginning from left to right, can be seen the Picasso Tower, the Madrid Tower, the Carrión Building, the Plaza de Toros de las Ventas, the

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<sup>17</sup> Constructed following a project by the same architects of the Edificio España in 1957, on the lower floor a theater used by the Headquarters of the Filmoteca Nacional and is in actuality a discotheque.

<sup>18</sup> Also shot in Tegel was the arrival of Lucas (Gonzalo Suárez) to Berlin in *¿Qué he hecho you para merecer esto?* (1984) and Raimunda (Penélope Cruz) in *Volver* (2006) cleaning up the floor of the new terminal T4 of Barajas.

<sup>19</sup> In *Kika* Nicolás arrives in Madrid from the Atocha Station and in *Todo sobre mi madre* Manuela inside an AVE coach passing under a tunnel on her journey from Madrid to Barcelona, many years before this high speed train had united these two cities.



Circle of Fine Arts, the Puerta de Alcalá<sup>20</sup> and the Building of Spain, the Metropolis Building, the Bank of Bilbao, the Seat of the Central Bank, and behind the two KIO Towers. All are models except the plaza de toros and the Puerta de Alcalá, and are created with photographs glued on a stand. All of them have almost the same scale, except the Puerta de Alcalá which is on another scale,<sup>21</sup> which is logical, first because it would have been reduced in such a way that it would be hardly seen, and because it is one of the best known monuments of Madrid, which Almodóvar photographs at the beginning of *Carne trémula* (1997). The relative position between the buildings seems to correspond to an aesthetic criterion with no relation to its real situation in the city, so the tallest and most modern are found on the ends surrounded by the rest. As with the already mentioned Torre de Madrid and the Edificio España and what they signified in their moment, as well as the Torre Picasso, we see the importance the others have.

The Carrión Building, known by this name and for the name of its developer and actually as "Capitol" for the movie theater homonym on the lower floor, is without a doubt one of the best buildings that has been constructed in Spain, created by the architects Luis Martinez Feduchi and Vicente Eced, the first having worked during some years in film as an artistic director,<sup>22</sup> and rose to a privileged place through a celebrated competition; he has been seen in numerous movies that take place in Madrid and in the large luminous signs that hung from its façade serve as a dramatic element in *El día de la bestia* (Alex de la Iglesia, 1995).

The Maestranza is the "temple" of bullfighting, it appears in a shot from *Átame* and is the symbol of Spanish Nationality, seen from the foreign perspective, the so called "fiesta nacional". In addition to its violent element, it is a brilliant and colorful spectacle which plays a major part in *Matador* and *Hable con ella*.

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<sup>20</sup> These two appear to be those that Ediciones Merino (Madrid) edited in 1994 and 1990 respectively. Curiously it's also mentioned in the catalog of this editorial that both La Cibeles (1992) is at a scale of 1:40 and the Prado Museum (1994) is at 1:300.

<sup>21</sup> If it is that of Merino, cited in the previous note, it is at a scale of 1:200, while the Plaza de Toros it at 1:500.

<sup>22</sup> See Jorge Gorostiza, *Directores artísticos del cine español*, Filmoteca Española. Madrid: Cátedra, 1997.

The Circle of Fine Arts is a notable building of the city, constructed following the blueprints of the architect Antonio Palacios. In it is developed a sequence from *Kika* (1993) and in the basement is the Theatre of Fine Arts, where supposedly *Un tranvía llamado deseo* en *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999) was performed. Just on the corner of the Circle is where the violation of Manuel's son took place in the same film. The already mentioned Metropolis building constructed in 1910 is also found in an exceptional location at the end of the Gran Vía, and in spite of having only five floors, until the year 1921 it was the tallest building in Spain.

The Seat of the Banco Central constructed in 1910, is a building by the architects Antonio Palacios and Joaquín Otamendi for the Banco Español Santander Central Hispano y actually the Instituto Cervantes is situated in another important location in Spain, near the Plaza de Cibeles<sup>23</sup> and in front of the Banco de España.

The Banco de Bilbao is a notable work by the well known architect Francisco Javier Sáenz de Oiza finished construction in 1981, and has been considered one of the best constructions of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in Spain. The so-called KIO constructions for the Kuwait Investments Office that developed them, and officially known as Puerta de Europa, constructed in the Plaza de Castilla under the project of the U.S. architects Philip Johnson and John Burgee, are buildings with little architectural interest, but undoubtedly, owing to their incline they have a striking appeal impossible to obviate in the urban Madrid environment. Inaugurated in 1996, three years after the premiere of *Kika* the mock ups of the unfinished facades and the framework still under construction can be seen in the final sequences of *El día de la bestia*. Almodóvar would return to show them, this time finished, when he filmed part of *Carne trémula* in the shanty neighborhood of La Ventilla, situated in its vicinity, before it was demolished to execute a large redesigning of that area.

Of the twelve buildings found on the board in the studio of the photographer Ramón, half are found in a radius of a kilometer and a half, on both sides of the Madrid Gran Vía and two are in the Centro Azca. All of them are shown in the publicity guides and have appeared on numerous occasions on screen and without a doubt, are the most

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<sup>23</sup> The emblematic fountain of Cibeles did not come to be seen in the films of Almodóvar, except in the letter sent by Pepa to Iván (Fernando Guillén) in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*.

meaningful part of the urban Madrid landscape and the collective imagery.

The Spanish word for "scale model" is "maqueta", but at the same time "model" is a model, a paradigm, a pattern, something that must serve as an example. The Madrid in miniature that Almodóvar shows us can also be a model of the city which at times is difficult to find its own identity.

#### Off limits

We began in Madrid with the undertaking of the business of what to make of the work of Pedro Almodóvar and we will finish with other unusual collateral matters of the films of this director related with places. In March of 2003 an ad appeared which read: "Live in an apartment from a movie." This property had been valued with a top price in the area for those years, only because Almodóvar had filmed it. The ad was for an apartment located on the main street in which Benito (Javier Cámara) had lived in *Hable con ella*, and from which you could see Alicia (Leonor Watling) dancing in a dance school, it was located on the same street corner as the Calle de Prado, which in reality had been the top floor of some shopping centers and had actually been occupied by a hotel. The producer of the film, El Deseo, sent out a press release that said it had no relation with the sale of the apartment. Only by having belonged to a fiction and had been picked for a film by Almodóvar, the price of the apartment had gone up.

In many of Almodóvar's films the characters leave the capital and this escape is the counterpoint that symbolizes the change in their fundamental perspective and trajectories. On the other hand, his last movie which premiered at the last moment; *Volver* was developed almost totally outside Madrid, and the majority was shot in his home town Calzada de Calatrava. Soon after was created a "Pedro Almodóvar Tourist Route" that "would pass through the heart of Calzada de Calatrava [...] just like the principle scenes from the movie *Volver*." The ad continued to explain that the town:

had gladly received the project of this route and that it hoped to convert the city into a tourist attraction center especially around

his last film, in which there appeared really good photographs of places in the area.<sup>24</sup>

It is significant that part of the route passes by a place so un-touristy as a cemetery, specifically the Granatula where *Volver* begins; according to the before-cited news item: "famous now since its appearance in the movie." Before only the dead buried in their graves and the mourners who came to visit them can now be seen as a pilgrimage point, walked on by oriental tourists, who may possibly transform the place. Within less than a year it will be difficult to recognize it as it appeared in the movie. The route is complemented by three sculptures picked in a national contest, one of which is the giant Madrid high heel shoe from *Tacones lejanos*, an attractive, ephemeral spectacle that has become a perennial joke in bad taste.

In April of 2008 some newspapers<sup>25</sup> from the Canary Islands published an item incoherently titled "Lanzarote Looks for the Almodóvar Girl." After the epigraph of "Indisputable Promotion" saying:

The arrival of the cinematic director, Pedro Almodóvar, and all his crew at Lanzarote without a doubt represents an extraordinary publicity campaign for the island of the volcanoes. In addition, with the impact that the information generated between film lovers, it has to be pointed out that there is a lot of income activated by the filming of a movie, especially dealing with the La Manchegan filmmaker.

The news was referring to the announcement of a casting organized by the producer of the Almodóvar brothers, El Deseo, because it appeared as if they were filming their next movie, *Los abrazos partidos* on that tourist island. Apart from the enthusiasm of the press, the local authorities, well instructed by the earlier experiences, placed maximum services for the filming of the movie.

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<sup>24</sup> *Top Rural*, "Ruta Turística Pedro Almodóvar, September 26, 2007, at <http://blog.toprural.com/ruta-turistica-Pedro-almodovar/>

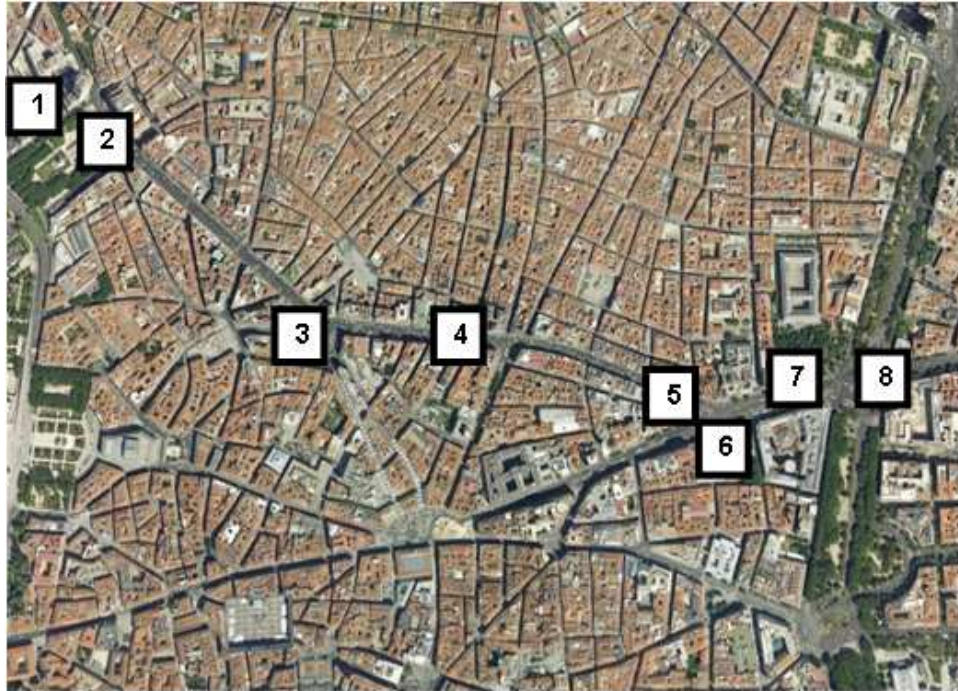
<sup>25</sup> In the Cultural section of *Canarias 7*, April 25, 2008 and *La Provincia*, *El Día* and *El Diario de Avisos* the following day. The announcement was confirmed by the new agency ACN Press.

Throughout our entire planet a new phenomena has been created because of films being produced. Territory is capable of suffering numerous transformations that will continue on into time. However, the landscape that has always been a human construction, interpreted by the individual and the collective, is among the few that leave a mark or an identification that lasts in space. Almodóvar is one of them, an agent of this dominion that marks space, being in reality a landscapist. On the other hand, the public powers that use their works can't be stopped because they find tourist promotion opportunities, and above all, economic benefit for their cities, looking to reclaim new transient attention in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Some creators, like Almodóvar, are even capable of being beneficial for the economy of these places; they possess a divine gift, the incredible faculty to modify reality thanks to their works. Never has the power of fiction gone so far.

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**MAP LOCATION OF THE MENTIONED BUILDINGS ON THE  
GRAN VIA IN MADRID**



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|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1.- Torre de Madrid  | 5.- Edificio Metrópolis     |
| 2.- Edificio España  | 6.- Círculo de Bellas Artes |
| 3.- Edificio Capitol | 7.- Instituto Cervantes     |
| 4.- Telefónica       | 8.- Plaza de la Cibeles     |