



THE SOCIAL COMMUNICATION OF URBAN CREATIVITY WITHIN HISTORIC ARCHITECTURAL CONTEXTS

OKUDA SAN MIGUEL PUBLIC ART INTERVENTION IN EL ESCORIAL

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
<i>Okuda San Miguel S. L. de El Escorial Contemporary Art Madrid Communication Creativity Urban Culture</i>	<i>This article reflects on the impact of contemporary urban art on historic buildings, taking as a case study the intervention by the Spanish artist Okuda San Miguel (Santander, 1980) at the former Barracks of Invalids and Mounted Volunteers in the town of San Lorenzo de El Escorial (Spain), as well as on the importance of designing planned communication strategies to disseminate contemporary art among the wider public beyond the artwork itself. The research analyses how Okuda's multifaceted oeuvre, characterised by geometry, vivid colour and pop-inspired fantasy, transforms heritage spaces into what may be described as a "small civic Sistine Chapel of urban art", thereby opening a debate on the dialogue between tradition and avant-garde within architectural heritage. This dialogue is examined in a context as classically rooted and Renaissance-inspired as the Escorial setting, together with the later neoclassical constructions developed in the town during the eighteenth century. Likewise, the study examines the communication and educational activities developed in parallel with the intervention to promote and disseminate contemporary art in San Lorenzo de El Escorial through workshops, meetings, lectures and summer courses.</i>

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1. Introduction and Context

This study presents a reflective investigation into the impact of contemporary urban art within architectural contexts regarded as historic. To this end, it takes as a case study the proposal by the Spanish artist Okuda San Miguel (Santander, 1980), carried out in 2024 at the former Barracks of Invalids and Mounted Volunteers in the Royal Site of San Lorenzo de El Escorial, located in the Sierra de Guadarrama, within the Spanish region of the Community of Madrid. The research examines how the multifaceted work of a contemporary artist—young yet internationally established such as Okuda—transforms heritage spaces such as the Madrid building through a highly personal style characterised by geometric forms, vivid colour and a playful imagination with constant references to contemporary popular culture.

In this way, the study opens a debate on the dialogue between tradition and avant-garde in a location of particular significance for Spanish architectural heritage, namely the surroundings of the Monastery of San Lorenzo de El Escorial. This intellectual and formal debate takes place within a context that is deeply classical and Renaissance-inspired, such as the Escorial setting, together with the later neoclassical constructions developed in the same town during the eighteenth century, given that the Barracks of Invalids and Mounted Volunteers is itself considered an eighteenth-century building designed and executed by the renowned architect Juan de Villanueva.

Furthermore, alongside the formal analysis of the artistic intervention, this study also examines— from the perspective of Information and Communication Sciences — the communication and educational activities developed in parallel with the intervention to promote and disseminate contemporary art in San Lorenzo de El Escorial through workshops, meetings, lectures and summer courses. Heritage, beyond being created and preserved, must also be communicated. Effective corporate communication is essential for managing dialogue in a way that restores trust and dismantles cultural barriers (Cordón-Benito, Maestro-Espínola and Abuín-Vences, 2022, p. 163), both in the arts and in society at large.

Accordingly, in addition to the analysis of the creative case study, this research presents an examination of all the communicative practices implemented to raise awareness of contemporary art through a series of complementary yet necessary activities, thereby achieving a holistic, comprehensive and integrated view of contemporary art within today's digital and knowledge-based society.

Figure 1. Poster of the 2024 UCM Summer Courses designed by Okuda.



(Source: UCM/Tribuna Complutense/ Google Pictures en: <https://tribuna.ucm.es> y/o <http://bit.ly/4tmLPa1>)

2. Objectives and Methodology

2.1. Primary and Secondary Objectives of the Research

The primary objective of this study is to analyse the aesthetic and symbolic impact of contemporary urban art interventions on heritage assets through strategic communication approaches. Contemporary art and digital communication are now closely interconnected (Elías-Zambrano and Cabezuelo-Lorenzo, 2024, p. 187). Accordingly, this research explores how visually disruptive elements can engage in dialogue with historic architecture. To this end, it evaluates the processes of re-signification and functional adaptation generated by such artistic interventions within a historic building.

Interventions carried out on buildings of monumental value, when considered in relation to their integration into the contemporary cultural and social life of towns and cities, enable an exercise in integration, analysis and dialogue between art, communication and society. In this specific case, the study examines the intervention by the artist Okuda San Miguel at the former Barracks of Invalids and Mounted Volunteers, a neoclassical work by the architect Juan de Villanueva (Madrid, 1739–1811).

As secondary objectives, this research seeks to examine the role of urban art in the revitalisation of disused or underutilised spaces, particularly its potential to generate new dynamics of use and to attract diverse audiences. It also aims to investigate the perceptions of the local community, institutions and specialists regarding the legitimacy, relevance and limits of this type of intervention within heritage contexts.

Finally, almost as a collateral objective, the study seeks to document comprehensively—through sources, documents and testimonies—the specific case of Okuda San Miguel’s intervention at the former Barracks of Invalids in San Lorenzo de El Escorial. At the same time, a necessary contextual review of analogous interventions is undertaken, identifying shared elements and lines of artistic, urban and social innovation.

Throughout, this research aims to contribute, from the perspective of Information and Communication Sciences to academic reflection on the opportunities and risks involved in fostering interaction between communication studies, visual culture, contemporary art and architectural heritage. Undoubtedly, urban art and contemporary creative practices have become effective allies in many strategies for sustainable cultural and tourism development, while also serving as humanistic elements that foster a more plural, open and diverse society.

2.2. Methodological Approach and Analytical Framework

This study seeks to address, from an academic perspective, the analysis of the contributions made by the artist Okuda San Miguel to the re-signification and decoration of the former Barracks of Invalids and Mounted Volunteers. Drawing on perspectives from the Humanities, Communication Sciences and Cultural Studies, the research adopts an interdisciplinary methodological approach based on the case study method. By selecting the former Barracks of Invalids and Mounted Volunteers as the principal case, the research initially applies visual documentation methods, archival review, and the analysis of primary and secondary sources relating both to the building itself and to the artistic intervention.

Secondly, a discursive and semiotic analysis is undertaken in order to interpret the messages, symbols and visual narratives generated by Okuda’s work, assessing how these elements interact with the history, architecture and pre-existing identity of the site. This analytical phase is complemented by qualitative research conducted through meetings with the artist himself, members of his team and key stakeholders, including local residents, institutional representatives, heritage experts and visitors, with the aim of gathering perceptions and evaluations of the intervention and its social impact. The study also draws upon existing scholarship on the artist, including works by Novo (2016), Auz (2022) and Fernández and De Miguel (2025), as well as Okuda San Miguel’s own publications (2012, 2015 and 2022).

Finally, the research analyses the communication and dissemination strategies associated with Okuda’s contemporary art proposal in San Lorenzo de El Escorial, which may also be understood

as an examination of media and communicative reception. This includes workshops, meetings, courses and cultural activities organised in the town, with the aim of studying the dissemination of the intervention through both traditional media and digital platforms. Such strategies are particularly relevant for engaging with Generation Z, which demands new narratives within the digital cultural paradigm (Viñarás-Abad, González-Liendo and Carrero-Márquez, 2025; Pedreño-Santos, Carcelén-García and Viñarás-Abad, 2025, p. 39). Accordingly, the study highlights the importance of communicative strategies aimed at bringing art and heritage closer to citizens, placing particular emphasis on interpersonal and group communication through activities held at the Casa de la Cultura of San Lorenzo de El Escorial.

This methodological approach enables a comprehensive and critical analysis of how contemporary artistic interventions can transform both the function and social perception of historic buildings, thereby contributing to broader debates on heritage valorisation, communication and cultural sustainability across different contexts. Creativity is understood as a transformative element of urban spaces (Rodríguez-Martín and Núñez-Gómez, 2025, p. 33), endowing territories with new identities through the interventions of young artists (Quattrone, 2025, p. 33). Such interventions are even being examined in emerging contexts such as the metaverse (Sidorenko, Herranz de la Casa and Cabezuelo, 2024, p. 39).

3. The Art of Okuda San Miguel

Óscar San Miguel Erice, known artistically as “Okuda” or Okuda San Miguel, was born in Cantabria (Spain) in 1980. He is one of the most widely recognised contemporary Spanish artists working in the field of urban art, both within the national context and internationally. He holds a degree in Fine Arts from the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM), where he completed his studies in 2007. Okuda began his artistic career in the world of graffiti in his hometown in the late 1990s. His work, which encompasses mural painting, sculpture, installation and design, is characterised using geometric volumes, planes of vivid colour and a distinctive iconography closely associated with pop surrealism. Although Okuda is particularly well known as a muralist, his practice extends far beyond this single facet of his production. Nevertheless, his murals—like those of many young yet internationally established urban artists—have become an open gateway to art in the public sphere, accessible to all audiences and, in some cases, a cultural and tourist attraction for visitors (Martínez-Rodríguez, 2023, p. 67).

Figura 2.-Okuda during the Opening of #Duo Exhibition with the Kings and Queens of Spain and The Netherlands in The Straat Museum in Amsterdam (2024).



Source: Google Pictures (05/08/2025).

Since the 2010s, Okuda has developed numerous intervention projects in public space and within historic buildings of diverse typologies, including deconsecrated former churches,

maritime lighthouses, former factories, industrial warehouses and workshops, as well as barracks and other heritage buildings, such as the former Barracks of Invalids and Mounted Volunteers in San Lorenzo de El Escorial.

In this way, he has become a leading reference in the re-signification of heritage through contemporary art. His artistic language explores the tensions between modernity and tradition, identity and globality, celebrating diversity while fostering new spaces for social and cultural interaction. Among his most emblematic works is the transformation of the former church in Llanera, Asturias—known as the Kaos Temple—which stands as a paradigmatic example of the dialogue between heritage and contemporary artistic creation.

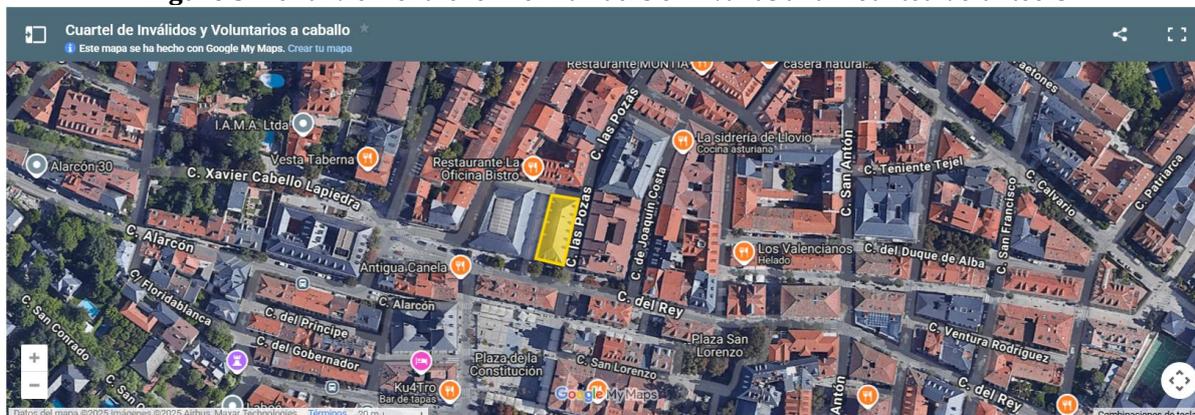
Throughout his career, in addition to working in different locations across Spain, Okuda has held solo and group exhibitions internationally in countries such as Ecuador, France, the United States, Japan, Morocco, Mexico and South Africa, among others. His urban interventions are distributed worldwide, spanning both densely populated urban environments and more remote or rural contexts, thereby reinforcing the global scope and cultural impact of his artistic practice.

3.1. The Former Barracks of Invalids and Mounted Volunteers

The earliest documented sources concerning the building currently known by its historic name as the former Barracks of Invalids and Mounted Volunteers date back to 1774, when the project for the barracks was first conceived. The majority of specialists—art and architectural historians with in-depth knowledge of the subject—agree in attributing its authorship to Juan de Villanueva, who was born in Madrid in 1739 and also died in the Spanish capital in 1811.

To this day, Villanueva is regarded as one of the great masters in the history of architecture in Spain and is widely considered the foremost exponent of Neoclassicism in the country. Trained at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando and with further formative experience in Italy, Juan de Villanueva developed an architectural oeuvre characterised by ornamental austerity and the predominance of straight lines, balance and symmetry.

Figure 3. Aerial view of the former Barracks of Invalids and Mounted Volunteers



Source: Google Maps (05/08/2025).

Villanueva served as court architect during the reign of Charles III. It should be recalled that it was under this monarch's rule that construction was authorised for the first time in the immediate surroundings of the Monastery of San Lorenzo de El Escorial, providing an unprecedented urban impulse to the area. This process would ultimately lead, a century later, to the town acquiring the status of a municipality distinct from El Escorial. This effectively occurred in 1836, when the municipalities of El Escorial and San Lorenzo de El Escorial were officially separated on 26 September of that year, the date on which San Lorenzo was constituted as an independent municipality and appointed its first mayor.

This separation was the result of a historical process closely linked to the construction and subsequent development of the Monastery of El Escorial and the Royal Site, which encouraged the emergence of a new population centre around the monastery, particularly following Charles III's authorisation in 1767 to build near the Lonja. Demographic growth and the gradual attainment of

administrative autonomy ultimately led to the definitive separation in the nineteenth century, within a broader context of political transformation and the disentailment of property.

Juan de Villanueva, for his part, designed some of the most emblematic buildings in Spain during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, including the Prado Museum, the Astronomical Observatory and the remodelling of Madrid's Plaza Mayor. His style reflects a refined and personal interpretation of European Neoclassicism, while simultaneously integrating distinctive elements of Spanish architectural tradition. The former Barracks of Invalids and Mounted Volunteers in San Lorenzo de El Escorial exemplifies this sober aesthetic and the rectilinear clarity that so characteristically define Villanueva's work.

Since its construction, the barracks have preserved most of their original architectural features, with only minimal alterations. The building has a rectangular ground plan and was originally freestanding, although it is currently adjoined to the municipal market (Ayuntamiento de San Lorenzo de El Escorial, 2025).

Figure 4.- Façade and External View of the Building designed by Juan de Villanueva (18th Century).



Source: Google Street Maps (05/08/2025).

Its exterior façade displays a typology akin to that of the Monastery and the Houses of Trades, featuring smooth granite ashlar masonry walls, a cornice of the same material and a mansard roof covered in slate. Internally, the principal staircase and the predominance of vaulted spaces stand out; it was upon these architectural elements that Okuda's intervention was carried out in 2024.

Shortly after its completion, the building began to serve dual functions as both barracks and prison. From 1887 onwards, its use was restricted exclusively to that of a district prison. In 1972, the Town Council transferred the property to the General Treasury of Social Security (TGSS), at which point it was adapted to house the "Hogar del Pensionista" in this town of the Sierra de Madrid. A subsequent restoration was undertaken, demonstrating a high degree of respect for the structural integrity of the ensemble.

At present, an agreement has been signed with the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM), whereby the building has become a permanent headquarters of the institution for a period of 25 years. In connection with this agreement, the UCM established the Chair of Sustainable Tourism Development. Simultaneously, the space is intended for the use and enjoyment of the local community of San Lorenzo de El Escorial for cultural and academic purposes organised by the UCM, including its prestigious Summer Courses.

3.2. A Contemporary Public Intervention in an Eighteenth-Century Building

Among the most representative works by Okuda San Miguel are a large-scale mural on the façade of the Town Hall of Fuenlabrada, the intervention in a deconsecrated church located in the parish of Cayés (Llanera, Asturias), and a collaborative mural with the artist Rosh333 at the Paco de Lucía underground station in Madrid. Equally noteworthy are his reinterpretation of the *Mona Lisa* on the façade of a residential block in Paris, his participation in the 2018 municipal *falla* of Valencia, and an artistic intervention on the Ajo lighthouse in Cantabria.

Okuda San Miguel's intervention in the former Barracks of Invalids and Mounted Volunteers in San Lorenzo de El Escorial constitutes a significant example of contemporary urban art integrated within historic heritage. The artist created a work on one of the building's vaulted ceilings, described by the Rector of the Complutense University of Madrid as "a small Sistine Chapel of urban art". The intervention combines multicoloured geometries and symbols characteristic of Okuda's artistic language, endowing the space with a dreamlike and vibrant atmosphere. Although the intervention is physical—visible, tangible and experiential—it generates new intangible values for the building's users, including staff, students and visitors. Here, the term "intangible" is understood as that which contributes value to "organisational culture" (Abuín-Vences and García-Rosales, 2025, p. 191).

Each image within the intervention invites reflection on the contrast between the site's monumental past and the eruption of colour and form across its walls and vaults. Okuda's work revitalises the eighteenth-century architecture designed by Juan de Villanueva and re-signifies the space as a meeting point between history and contemporary creativity.

Figure 5.- Interior views of the building following Okuda's 2024 intervention, showing the entrance portal and the access to one of the meeting rooms.



Source: Photography by Authors' own work (photographs taken in July 2025).

In 2024, this repertoire was expanded with Okuda San Miguel's work on the vaults of the former Barracks of Invalids and Mounted Volunteers in San Lorenzo de El Escorial, an eighteenth-century historic building designed by Juan de Villanueva and the subject of a recent restoration carried out with due respect for its original structure. Within the framework of this analysis, it may be stated with confidence that:

- The intervention features geometric figures and intense colours, highlighting Okuda's ability to transform austere and solemn spaces into vibrant universes filled with visual dynamism.
- The images reveal a careful integration with the building's original architectural elements, underscoring a dialogue between classical architecture and contemporary urban art that respects existing forms while introducing new energy into the environment.

- Given that the building is a functional and active space, used daily by students, staff and visitors, as well as by the local community, the intervention clearly foregrounds its educational value, transforming the former barracks into a living space for culture and community engagement.

Geometry and polychromy play a fundamental role in shaping Okuda San Miguel's distinctive visual language. His work is characterised by the use of geometric forms—particularly polygons, spheres and prisms—which construct complex compositions and provide structural coherence to his murals and sculptures. These geometric elements, at times superimposed or interwoven, generate a dynamic three-dimensional effect that transforms the architectural surfaces upon which the intervention is carried out.

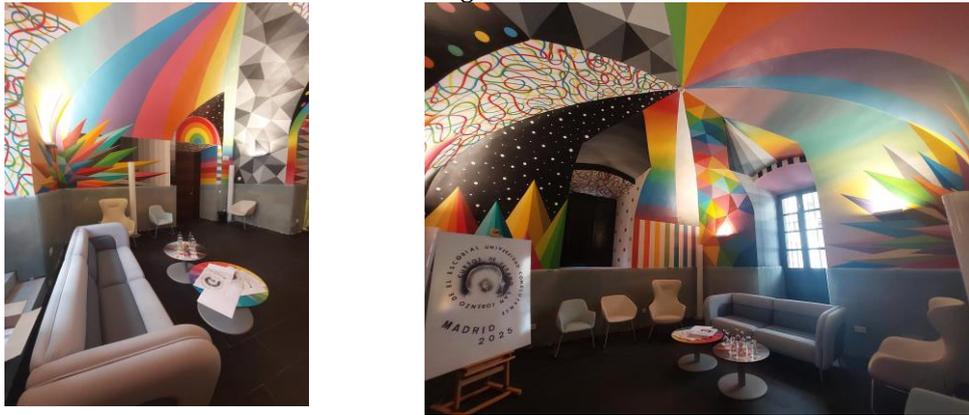
Figure 6.- Interior views of the building following Okuda's 2024 intervention, showing the entrance portal and the access to one of the meeting rooms.



Source: Photography by Authors' own work (photographs taken in July 2025).

Polychromy, understood as the deliberate and vibrant use of an extensive range of pure and saturated colours, is equally central to his visual language. This chromatic approach not only endows his works with a distinctive visual energy, but also reinforces their dreamlike and universal character, transforming urban or heritage spaces into settings of contemporary fantasy.

Figure 7.- Interior views of the so-called Rector's Hall in the former Barracks of Invalids and Mounted Volunteers following Okuda's 2024 intervention.



Source: Photography by Authors' own work (photographs taken in July 2025).

Okuda's intervention in this building does not merely embellish the space but rather re-signifies the cultural value of the former barracks, repositioning it as a reference point for collaboration between tradition and artistic innovation.

In this urban intervention carried out within the Escorial building, as in all of Okuda San Miguel's works, colour operates as an autonomous semantic system: it structures form, symbolises contemporary diversity and functions as a high-impact visual communication device within the urban environment, both on exterior façades and, in this case, on the interior walls of the former Barracks of Invalids and Mounted Volunteers in San Lorenzo de El Escorial.

The conjunction of rigorous geometry and exuberant polychromy enables Okuda to re-signify architectural and symbolic elements, establishing a dialogue between the rationality of form and the expressive freedom of colour, while fostering emotional and sensory interaction with the viewer.

3.3. Complementary Communication and Educational Actions for the Dissemination of Contemporary Art in San Lorenzo de El Escorial

Contemporary art often entails the need for communication, outreach and awareness-raising campaigns in order to make itself known, to explain its meanings, to involve the community and, to some extent, to prevent potential conflicts with its surrounding context. Within this framework, in addition to the artistic intervention carried out by Okuda at the former Barracks of Invalids and Mounted Volunteers, the Cantabrian artist also developed a series of educational and dissemination activities in San Lorenzo de El Escorial during 2024 and 2025.

Beyond painting the vaults of the former Barracks of Invalids—now converted into the permanent headquarters of the Complutense University of Madrid's Summer Courses—Okuda initiated further actions aligned with social communication and community-based dissemination of contemporary art. These initiatives were designed to publicise what some institutional representatives have described as “a small secular and academic Sistine Chapel of urban art”, thereby extending the impact of the artistic intervention beyond the physical artwork and embedding it within a broader framework of cultural mediation and public engagement.

Figure 8. Mural painting workshop with Okuda San Miguel at the Casa de la Cultura of San Lorenzo de El Escorial, held in the context of the Complutense University of Madrid Summer Courses, July 2025.



Source: Photograph by Salvador Gómez García, Deputy Director of the UCM Summer Courses.

What follows is a list of the activities, workshops, courses and participations involving the artist Okuda San Miguel within the framework of the Complutense University of Madrid's Summer Courses and the cultural programme of San Lorenzo de El Escorial during the years 2024 and 2025.

In 2024, Okuda served as the official poster artist for the UCM Summer Courses. He designed the poster illustrating the 37th edition of the Summer Courses, held from 1 to 26 July in San Lorenzo de El Escorial. In parallel, he launched the exhibition **Mirada Fractal**, which took place from 2 July to 2 August 2024. The exhibition was hosted at the Casa de la Cultura of San Lorenzo de El Escorial and was met with considerable public success. It featured works from different stages of the artist's career, including inflatable sculptures, embroidered tapestries and collaborative pieces created with his mother. The exhibition formed part of the cultural activities organised alongside the Summer Courses.

Within the same context of the UCM summer programme, an artistic and documentary workshop was also held. As part of the initiatives promoted in collaboration with the Complutense University, a workshop was organised and the documentary **Equilibri**, focused on Okuda's creative process, was screened, together with lectures and activities open to the general public.

Following the success and positive reception of the 2024 programme, further initiatives were developed in 2025. Among them was the summer course entitled **Okuda San Miguel: Colour as a Tool for Change**, held from 14 to 18 July at the Casa de la Cultura of San Lorenzo de El Escorial. During this immersive course, practical workshops on tapestry and mural creation were delivered by Okuda and his mother, alongside a collective mural intervention involving course participants. The programme also included discussion lunches with members of his legal and creative team, as well as meetings with guests from the fields of art, design and entertainment. In addition, the course offered an exclusive visit to Okuda's studio in Madrid—known as the **Factory of Dreams**, located in the Usera district—and featured presentations of social and cultural projects (**Kaos Garden**, **Coloring the World Foundation**, **Okulandia**), as well as a music festival held on one of the course evenings.

Figure 9. Conference entitled “Kaos Garden” by Okuda San Miguel, held in July 2025 at the Casa de la Cultura of San Lorenzo de El Escorial as part of the Complutense University of Madrid Summer Courses.



Source: Author: Joaquín Recas (Coordinator of the UCM Summer Courses, July 2025).

In this way, Okuda and his team were deeply involved in institutional activities and community-based encounters, highlighting his role as a leading figure in urban art and heritage re-signification within both the university sphere and the local context of San Lorenzo de El Escorial. It may therefore be asserted that this set of initiatives clearly demonstrates the relevance of Okuda San Miguel in the cultural and academic dynamization of San Lorenzo de El Escorial, consolidating the link between contemporary art, historic heritage and university-based education.

4. Final Discussion and Conclusions

Okuda San Miguel’s interventions in classical buildings, such as the case analysed here, demonstrate the artist’s ability to engage in dialogue with diverse spaces, incorporating his characteristic visual language of geometric forms and vibrant polychrome into contemporary heritage and urban contexts. In Okuda’s work, colour constitutes a fundamental structural and semantic element, far removed from any merely decorative function. His artistic production is characterised by the use of highly saturated and contrasting palettes—particularly reds, blues, yellows, greens and magentas—organised into geometric planes that replace traditional chiaroscuro modelling. In this way, colour becomes the primary resource for constructing volume, fragmenting form and generating visual dynamism. Colour in Okuda’s practice not only defines the aesthetic dimension of the work, but also articulates its critical, social and cultural discourse, functioning as a truly autonomous visual language.

This innovation is especially striking in the intervention within a building such as the Barracks of Invalids and Mounted Volunteers, where the predominant material is the grey granite typical of the Sierra de Guadarrama. From a symbolic perspective, this chromatic eruption operates as a metaphorical contrast between past and future, infusing a cold, austere space with the colours of cultural diversity, plural identities and hybrid coexistence—hallmarks of contemporary society. In doing so, it reinforces discourses of inclusion and openness in opposition to closed or hierarchical categories, effectively updating a building that is several centuries old.

Finally, from a psychological and communicative standpoint, it must be emphasised that colour functions as a powerful perceptual stimulus that enhances attention, visual memory and positive emotional reception, while also facilitating the media dissemination of the work in digital and urban environments. This effect is even more pronounced within historic settings such as San Lorenzo de El Escorial. In the public sphere, Okuda’s chromatic intensity transforms otherwise neutral architectures into recognisable visual landmarks, endowing them with renewed symbolic and communicative value. In historic contexts, his work—integrated with that of Juan de Villanueva—brings together two historical moments, two styles and two worlds, creating a compelling metaphor for university education, lifelong learning, summer courses and the inherently curious nature of human beings.

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