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**RESTORATION AND REPOPULATION OF DETERIORATED CITY CENTRES:
THE INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE**

This document was prepared by Mr. José Ramón Moreno García. The views expressed in this work, which has not been subject to editorial revision, are the exclusive responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Organization. This paper is not an official translation of the original.

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I. AUSTERITY IN THE FACE OF WASTE

At the end of the 1970s, the call for austerity policies for cities and territories was nothing more than an expression of cultural and professional sector concern for the generalized crisis of the cities and the recognition of the fact that the speculative and wasteful urbanism of recent decades was largely responsible for the destruction of the cultural heritage of many European cities.

It was then that the tension between centre and periphery became more evident, as the inadequate relationship between the two sectors became clear. The paradox between a well-established centre with no population and a new periphery with serious infrastructural and service deficits only underscored the lack of articulation and understanding between those two urban sectors.

The crisis of the city became extreme. Both political sensitivity to the seriousness of the problem and sufficiently powerful legal mechanisms were lacking.

In general, city centres continue to be abandoned by the dominant class which prefers to live in privileged urbanizations outside the urban area, incidentally selling their urban properties to the nearest speculator. In that way, very interesting buildings are razed, to be substituted by multi-family housing which is far removed from traditional typological constants or by service sector buildings which implacably transform the central nucleus of the historical cities of Western Europe.

II. CENTRE AND PERIPHERY

Thus, in the central areas, an elderly and poor population of persons who can barely maintain their own homes coexists with administrative buildings or bank branches or, in the best of cases, with apartment buildings which -of course- avoid respecting those traditional parameters which are adequate to the place.

On the other hand, the periphery has become massified with typological models of doubtful urban adequacy, in order to receive rural migrants attracted by the dream of improved quality of life.

Speculation arises, then, in this double sphere which constitutes the essence of the city: in the periphery, building low quality homes, both in terms of construction and architecturally, with a complete lack of services and, often, of infrastructure; and, in the centre, destroying the model and altering its uses.

Spatial segregation comes to be perceived as natural. The city becomes a territorial expression of class struggle, in which spatial areas are perfectly identified with life styles; territory with income, in fully coherent fashion.

III. MONUMENT AND CITY

Theoretical developments during the 1970s promoted a radical change of position with respect to the city. Cultural and social pressures had their impact on administrative action which brought about legislative change.

Not only was the urban planning of the period following the last great war questioned, but, from the perspective of cultural heritage, the notion of monument was enriched by new concepts which were to be incorporated into the discourse of future urbanistic activity.

In fact, all during this century, there have continually been meetings of specialists in which the issue related to so-called historical-artistic heritage has been delineated and refined. Only in 1954, in the Pact of the Hague, was the concept of "cultural patrimony" defined for the first time, in the following terms:

"Cultural patrimony, whatever their origin or owner, are:

a) Movable and immovable patrimony of great importance in the cultural heritage of peoples, such as architectural, artistic or historical monuments, be they religious or lay, archaeological sites, and building sites insofar as they are of artistic or historical interest;

b) Buildings of which the main and real purpose is to conserve or display the movable cultural patrimony defined in the preceding paragraph;

c) Centres which contain a considerable number of the cultural patrimony defined in the preceding paragraphs, to be called monument centres."

In 1964, in Venice, criteria were established for the correct interpretation of the epochs represented in each "cultural good", in order to respect those periods or emphasize them, without detriment to the overall understanding of the object in question.

Later, in October 1975, in Amsterdam, the notion of monument was broadened to include groups of buildings, traditional towns, surroundings, etc., introducing the novel concept of "integral conservation".

And it is precisely in Quito, in 1977, when "historical centre" is defined as referring to "living human settlements, strongly conditioned by a physical structure coming from the past and recognizable as representative of the evolution of a people".

Now, not only is the patrimonial value of constructed morphologies, often understood as referring only to the visual appearance of the place, recognized, but the typological concept also includes the customs and ways of life and, therefore, the complex cultural and social relationships which generated the centres of our cities.

The issue, then, is one of the integral conservation of historical nuclei in which the significance of the atmosphere of a street can have equal weight to that of a building.

Integral planning for any urban sector depends on a globalized understanding of the problem. The proposal of partial solutions to sector conflicts is no longer valid.

There is general rejection of the homogenizing "zoning" of the earlier position for more emphasis on careful, flexible and small scale planning.

IV. END OF A PHASE

The effort involved in the formulation of urban development doctrine, in which austerity is the key and reasonable criteria for regenerating the damaged city prevail, coincides with the energy crises of the early years of the decade which put an abrupt end to the developmentalist stage promoted by incipient and uncultured capital.

The time was ripe for civil authority to recognize the obvious and to begin to develop a new or corrected legal framework which would halt the total destruction of historical centres, giving rise to cautionary norms which at least partially resolve some of the contradictions which inevitably arise.

It is possible to plan on the basis of fundamental, enabling legislation. The authorities need a plan to make the desires of the majority legitimate, within a democratic system.

Such a plan allows for establishing urban strategies and compensatory mechanisms which will improve the living conditions of citizens by distributing gains from the private to the collective sphere.

V. THE SPANISH EXPERIENCE

In Spain, change began with the approval of the new Constitution in 1978, ratifying the democratic desires of the population which, during the previous year, had witnessed the first steps of freely elected Town Councils.

From the beginning, those Councils initiated reviews of their urban plans. There were, at least, two coincidental criteria: the expansionist tendencies of the cities must be limited as much as possible and the historical centres must be protected immediately.

On the one hand, land to be urbanized which, in recent years, had been the principal instrument of the speculative developer, was restricted and, on the other, cautionary suspensions of construction licenses in the historical centres and singular areas of the municipal territory were enacted, with the double objective of halting the destruction of cultural patrimony and gaining sufficient time to elaborate the Special Plan which was to ensure, at least temporarily, adequate intervention in the established urban fabric.

Thus, there was a return to the inherited city, with a careful look at the central areas and a recovery of the attractiveness that had been lost to those social sectors which prefer to acquire and restore buildings of a traditional character, in order to live once again in the historical nucleus.

In the 1980s, Spain developed legislation which allowed for the timid beginnings of rehabilitary action by creating a set of financial supports which, although insufficient and requiring complex bureaucratic paperwork, are adequate for the progressive transformation of the model for housing planning which had prevailed until then, based essentially on the production of new housing.

VI. ADMINISTRATIVE DECENTRALIZATION

At that time, the scenario of given attributions changed radically in Spain, as the Central State transferred numerous competencies to the Autonomous Communities, in a process of decentralization which has, to a large extent, changed planning and management activity in the areas of urbanism and housing.

Now, the Regions and Autonomous Communities, equipped with the legislative and governmental bodies necessary to develop what is best for each territory, within the framework of the economic planning which still corresponds to the Central Government, exercise exclusive competence in those areas.

The Central Government is, therefore, the instance for establishing the general economic frame of reference for housing policy, basically by indicating the types of financial help to which users or beneficiaries will have rights.

Within that general framework, previously negotiated with the Autonomous Communities, it is the Communities themselves that design their own policy, assigning economic resources -received from the State or generated locally- to housing, according to a governmental programme and subject to Regional Parliament budget control.

VII. DISTRIBUTION OF COMPETENCIES

Thus, in little less than ten years, an administrative structure with three basic levels has been progressively improved: the Central State, the Autonomous Communities and the Town Councils.

The Central Government is responsible for economic planning and distributes resources in function of contrasting deficits; the Autonomous Communities design and legislate concrete policy and manage their own budgets; the Town Councils are collaborative bodies for the implementation of that policy, cooperating with the Region in diverse areas (such as: coverage of the Municipal deficit, providing land for housing construction, managing contracts or development construction and in the definition of the future users of new or rehabilitated housing).

The Town Councils, in turn, are responsible for urban planning within their territory, subject to the legal control of the Autonomous Community.

In that way, the Town Councils propose and elaborate their own Plans for Urban Development, which define the zones of the city and the mid-term (eight years) strategies for each zone. Preparatory studies detect infrastructural, service and housing deficits, as well as evaluating the stock of existing housing (state of conservation, empty housing, etc.).

VIII. SPECIAL PLANNING IN CENTRAL AREAS

The historical centres of medium-sized or large cities are usually defined by a Special Plan which, in spite of being rather specific, must be articulated with the rest of the territory so as not to lose the notion of globality which must predominate in any instrument of urban planning.

In general, the diagnosis of the central areas of our cities corresponds to the analysis made above: degraded patrimony, buildings of the tertiary sector, new interventions with inadequate typologies, deficits in the renewal of basic infrastructure and urban services, etc.

At the same time, the population remaining in those areas is ageing, with very low housing density, little mobility and low incomes.

Nevertheless, a contrasting vision of an historical centre allows for the diagnosis of many positive factors: the urban image as the primordial element for recovery; the preservation of residential and representative structural typologies; the low rate of occupancy, which will permit the incorporation of new residents; or the survival of commercial structures which constitute a concrete attraction for residents from other sectors. All in all, the conviction that a recovered and renewed urban centre can offer improved quality of life.

IX. PRIVATE INITIATIVE

In Spain, it is possible to verify the truth of that affirmation. In ten years, many urban centres have been renovated or are being recovered, with a housing supply of sufficient quality to ensure economic viability. In recent years, a considerable part of real estate business has involved interventions in central areas on the basis of more respectful premises than years ago, obliged to accept them -of course- by municipal norms and regulations.

The private sector intervenes in central areas either through general development efforts or individual initiative.

In the first case, if developers fulfill the conditions established in the housing norms (size, sale price, designated users, etc.), they have recourse to the financial aid provided by the State.

However, most aid is personalized in terms of future users. If persons accede to housing built by a developer who, in turn, fulfills the norms, they may opt for a number of benefits (subsidies, loans with subsidized interest rates, fiscal benefits, etc.), if they, for their part, also duly demonstrate a certain socioeconomic situation.

The idea is to direct public assistance to the sectors most in need. "Aid to stone", which was the principal characteristic of previous policy when it was necessary for the construction sector to be the locomotive of the economy, has been replaced by personalized assistance.

A series of fiscal aid and benefits are available to the individual family for rehabilitating their home, which may reduce the real cost of the work to be done by half.

Aid provided by the State may be complemented by support from the Autonomous Community or the Town Council itself.

X. PUBLIC INITIATIVE

In the matter of intervening in the central areas of cities, the task undertaken by the public sector is manifold.

The responsibility for Municipal planning is exclusively public, exercised through the Town Councils and their Management Offices.

In some cases, the Special Plan in that area provides for its own Management Office which plans and manages administrative matters with a certain degree of autonomy from the municipal authority, in an effort to achieve greater agility and efficacy than is possible in ordinary administration.

The Special Plan ought to include among its documents a Plan of Stages, with its corresponding Economic Plan, containing and evaluating the activities programmed and indicating the public agent responsible for financing them. For example, the Special Plan of a coastal city may foresee activity in the coastal zone which should be financed by the Central Administration, given its competence over that zone. Or it may require housing rehabilitation or the development of new public housing which fall within the scope of Autonomous Community competence and financing. And it may, finally, design public spaces or renew infrastructural networks with funds from the municipal budget.

XI. PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT

All Plans should be instruments negotiated among all competent Administrations, with each assuming its corresponding degree of responsibility (fundamentally economic), within the time frame established by the Plan, all to be coordinated through the Management office or Special Plan office.

In the concrete case of housing, public action should give the example of what is being sought overall.

There should not be excessive interventions on the territory, given that equilibrium with private initiative should be maintained and, above all, equilibrium with guidelines of social integration.

Direct public action must resolve the problem of those in greatest need, providing an adequate and fitting product.

There is great scope for action: from taking advantage of empty urban spaces in which expropriatory action allows for making properties part of the Public Patrimony, to personalized economic assistance for the rehabilitation of degraded housing; from the reuse of publicly owned buildings for services or housing, to the implementation of school-workshops for the recovery of skills and rehabilitary self-construction; from implementing projects elaborated by technicians, to organizing small Information and Advisory Offices for residents in each neighborhood.

Intervention in Central Area Patrimony requires: decentralization, instrumental diversity, administrative flexibility, permanent management and imaginative and creative managers.

XII. PUBLIC REHABILITATION

From that whole range of possibilities for action, it may be important to highlight the rehabilitation of public properties as a priority activity, which will serve as an incentive and model.

The realization of the way in which public intervention in a central area can generate renewal in that area is the first step in creating confidence while, simultaneously, promoting operations on a larger scale with social support.

Several factors should be kept in mind in that type of public action:

i) In the case of residential buildings, the permanence of the current residents should be a basic rule. The possibility of joint operations which involve temporary relocation must not imply a definitive move from the neighborhood, nor the spatial segregation of the population.

ii) Rehabilitory action on buildings for general use (markets, schools, ...) or publicly owned housing should maintain equilibrium between the preservation of traditional typologies and their adaptation to present ways of life and behaviour.

iii) Interventions in buildings considered to be cultural patrimony ought to consider not only the building itself but also its surroundings, in a reasonable effort to achieve integral conservation which will not leave the monument isolated from its context.

iv) The combination of public action with private initiative, within the regulatory context of the Plan, can be satisfactory if the "clientele" of each operator is clearly differentiated from the beginning.

XIII. PLAN FINANCING

Experience in Spain demonstrates that the poorer social strata should be attended exclusively by the public sector through direct new housing operations or rehabilitatory actions which provide housing to be rented at a monthly rate no greater than 10% of family income.

Public funds for the Plan can be obtained from different Administrations, according to the agreements established during the elaboration of the document so that they will be fully reflected in the Plan of Stages and the economic-financial study.

Moreover, the active management of the general plan of a city can and must obtain sufficient economic and patrimonial resources to finance a certain percentage of public investments.

Obligatory transfers of property made by individuals for the emplacement of services or the "shared use" formulas for construction allow Town Councils ample maneuvering room, above all in the land market.

There must be clear political will to implement a Plan for it to be viable, as well as a legislative framework which will guarantee the legality and viability of the strategies planned.

In Spain, urban experiences of a certain level of quality would have been difficult to implement were it not for the Land Law, which has functioned as the basic norm for the plan, and the profound review and reform of the Tax Laws which has allowed Public Administrations to dispose of sufficient economic resources to make the political will for the urban renewal of their cities and, especially, their central areas, viable.

From that point, the final objective for recovery of the sector is established according to diversified strategies governed by basic principles of achieving maximum social profit from the established patrimony, respecting the established urban fabric and stabilized populational structures.

XIV. CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Another essential rule in these processes of urban renewal is to achieve citizen support for them. The different phases of the plan and its subsequent implementation should be ratified by the opinion and participation of area residents, first, and by that of the whole city, later.

Democratic articulation of participation can be as important as adequate management of the Plan. Achieving coherence between citizen orientation and governmental action guarantees final success.

XV. BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

The complexity of these renovation processes, in which the action is centred on established urban fabrics with a predetermined social composition, calls for extremely cautious public intervention in the design of the Plan and permanently active intervention in its implementation, which in turn require constant dedication of pluriprofessional teams sponsored by local authority.

Initial difficulties in obtaining funds should not paralyse public action.

Experience shows that an initial investment in the renewal of infrastructure is sufficient to generate market expectations; that public experience which demonstrates the economic viability of a renewal operation will serve as a model for the private sector; and that organized social pressure is capable of generating unforeseen mechanisms of urban recovery.

At any rate, European experience in the last decade, and concretely that of Spain, in which there has been a real change in the model for treating cities, revaluing central areas and re-equipping the peripheries, is not necessarily transferable to the large cities of Latin America in which the problems of migratory groups, demographic growth rates, levels of overcrowding, concentration of poverty and severe budgetary restrictions reach levels unknown in Europe.

The difference in scale is so great as to possibly invalidate the methodology presented here, at least in its more concrete aspects.

However, the need for urban legal and fiscal instruments which will enable democratic planning, capable of rescuing values for the community, as well as organizing a balanced territory in which it is possible for people to live together, is sufficient for initiating the effective recovery of the central areas of the cities of the region.