

LAND-USE PLANNING AND URBAN FORM IN CATALONIA. THE CASE OF GIRONA REGION (1979-2006)

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I. INTRODUCTION

Spain's entry into the European Union (EU) in 1986 marked the beginning of a new growth cycle based on the tertiary sector and real estate. This stimulated the so-called «housing bubble», one of the most distinctive aspects of the Spanish urban model in the context of globalisation. Its causes were specialisation in residential tourism, the reduction in the number of persons per household and the middle-class attitude to housing as an investment. Despite successive increases in prices, demand was sustained thanks to easily acquired mortgages.

Planning policy also facilitated this irresponsible dynamic. On the one hand, local authorities competed to increase the supply of land and attract potential investors. In addition, regional administrations, including that in Catalonia, failed to implement regional land planning instruments. The inevitable result, given the potential earnings from development projects, was a huge expansion in the urbanised area and a lack of co-ordinated planning.

Thus, urban sprawl —the phenomenon of dispersion, reduction in density and separation of uses in the advanced capitalist city— was an expression of particular factors related to planning and the economic and social structure. Various international authors have also shown that the newly global urban form has displayed new morphological categories, portraying both the changing location patterns of economic activities and residence in the post-industrial city as well as traces of post-modern culture.

This paper is a summarisation of a doctoral thesis aimed at analysing the urbanisation process in the Girona region between 1979 (the year of incorporation of the democratic councils) and 2006, the year immediately prior to the recession. This area, located north-east of Barcelona, offers a significant illustration of the transformations that have affected Catalonia and the Spanish Mediterranean coast. The study focused on the analysis of zone development plans, the documents that regulate zoning under the local development framework in each new area of developable land. The interpretation of the results was based on two

complementary scales. The regional scale is the appropriate level at which to understand the dynamics of urban sprawl. The scale of particular places facilitates interpretation in terms of urban form. A study of this kind is a pioneering study in Spain because of the time dimension (almost three decades) and the magnitude of data analysed (211 municipalities and 522 zone development plans).

II. THE PLANNING SCENARIO

In 1979, after the Generalitat (the regional government) had assumed responsibility for urban planning, the main municipalities of the Girona region began to revise their local development frameworks. These new frameworks projected future scenarios for a period of 15 to 20 years.

The first local development frameworks prepared during this phase set out to moderate growth and resolve the deficiencies inherited from the previous period. In this context, the concept of the zone development plan emerged as the basic tool used to define the morphology of urban areas while also designating public space and facilities. But in practical terms there were problems, partly because huge pockets of developable land and numerous illegal activities had to be incorporated into the new development schemes. Furthermore, the new supra-municipal planning schemes for urban areas (such as those for Girona and Figueres) rapidly broke down after the regional elections in 1980, as the new centre-right government believed that planning was entirely a municipal responsibility.

As a result, individual municipalities begin to formulate plans according to their own aspirations. For example, in the case of one third of the local development frameworks for the urban area of Girona and the coastal municipalities, the area specified for urban development equalled or exceeded the existing built-up area of the settlement. Despite the new planning regime, inertia effects combined with irresponsible management in some cases turned new planning schemes into nothing more than a blueprint for expansion and growth. Moreover, while core towns tended to appear well designed, smaller municipalities competed with one another and their ambitious development plans merely encouraged a further wave of urban sprawl.

III. THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE AT THE REGIONAL LEVEL

From 1979 to 2006, 522 zone development plans were approved in the Girona region involving 5,930 hectares (ha). Newly-formulated plans accounted for 69% of the area scheduled for development while the remaining 31% related to illegal projects dating from the period of *desarrollismo*, which subsequently were regularised.

The time frame covered four stages. The first extended from 1979 to 1985 and was associated with the recession of the 1970s. The second phase extended from 1986 to 1992. This was a period of rapid growth accompanied by an influx of capital investment, stimulated by Spain's entry into the EU. From 1992 to 1995, there was a brief recession, dealt with by devaluation of the currency, greater flexibility in the labour market and deregulation of the economy. A second cycle of expansion began in 1996 and extended until 2006. This cycle of expansion was even stronger than the first in terms of the zone development plans approved and its duration (more than ten years).

In tracing the proliferation of zone development plans, three spatial categories can be identified. Firstly the coast, which experienced high growth linked to the transition from traditional tourism to residential property tourism. This process also affected the coastal hinterland for the first time. Secondly, the urban areas, where development involved not only core towns but more especially nearby municipalities in the surrounding areas: in the case of the Girona urban area, only 24% of the plans related to the core town itself. Thirdly, the «network areas», namely the municipalities located on the road corridors linking Girona with other urban areas, with the coast and with the Barcelona Metropolitan Region. Although overall there was significant growth in towns, the most striking aspect of this phase was the wide spread of urbanisation throughout the Girona region.

Sprawl was defined broadly to include not only physical dispersion but also oversized extensions that doubled or even tripled the already urbanised land in a given municipality. According to these criteria, sprawl accounted for 61% of the total area covered by zone development plans. Half of this area related to subsequently regularised plans from the previous period, while half, unfortunately, related to new plans. The problem particularly affected small municipalities on the coastline, second-tier coastal municipalities and those adjoining larger urban areas where sprawl was linked to oversized local development frameworks and «on demand» modifications of these. In these cases, developers moved to the hinterland, where they found not only cheaper rural land but also local administrations, which were more likely to allow rezoning. After local municipalities had given preliminary approval to zone development plans, prospective developers and local governments then lobbied the provincial planning commission in order to win support for the plan. This led to confusion between public and private interests and enabled the private sector to make huge profits. In short, urban sprawl in many cases was the result of «free-riding» land use practices by urban developers with the consent of local administrations and in the absence of a coordinated approach to land-use planning.

IV. THE MORPHOLOGICAL TYPOLOGIES

Examination of zone development plans indicated that urban expansion involved three distinct morphological categories: urban extensions, low-density housing estates and industrial parks.

The first category is urban extension. 236 zone development plans of this kind were approved, representing 46% of all plans and 26% of the total area. Urban extensions are compact housing estates with medium-high densities. This concept dates back to the pioneering work of Ildefonso Cerdà and his urban extension for Barcelona, developed in the second half of the nineteenth century. Following Spain's transition to democracy, this model was adopted with little modification and became the quintessential template for modelling urban form and gaining public space. In its essential characteristics (compactness, and the mix of uses and social groups) urban extension embodied a high degree of continuity with the traditional Mediterranean city model.

The second category is the low-density housing estate (103 plans of this kind were approved, that is, 19% of all plans and 39% of the total area). The explosion of mass summer tourism in the 1960s led to the proliferation of low-density second-home housing estates on

the coast. Many developers, especially from Barcelona, now saw a profitable business opportunity, although in many cases this involved illegal developments and selling plots without basic infrastructure. As a result, local administrations after 1979 had to legalise many such developments by preparing new zone development plans. But in view of the limited financial capacity of both the town councils and the owners, this process often made it necessary to expand urbanised areas and sell new plots in order to finance essential infrastructure projects.

In addition, from the second half of the 1980s the demand for second homes picked up again and a new post-modern profile project developed. These new projects met the required legal standards and often exhibited high urban quality but their locational patterns and rates of land consumption were absolutely unsustainable. This was specially the case of golf resorts. It should also be noted that, in addition to leisure-oriented estates, low-density housing estates for commuters were developed en masse from the 1990s onwards in small municipalities on the periphery of urban areas. This new wave of plans was closely linked to oversized projects as well as to practices such as designing or modifying local development frameworks «on demand».

The third morphological category refers to industrial and business parks (171 plans of this kind were approved, that is, 33% of all plans and 34% of the total area). Until the 1970s, many such parks were set up spontaneously and had serious deficiencies in infrastructure. However, after 1979 the Generalitat encouraged the development of large-scale industrial parks, especially in small towns on the periphery of large cities.

From the 1990s onwards, there was a shift in the concept of the industrial estate due to the growth of the tertiary sector and globalisation of the economy. Whereas industrial estates previously had been occupied by factories, a gradual transition now occurred to a more complex format in which industrial plants, offices and logistics shared a common space or were set up in specialised estates. Indeed, new commercial and leisure activities (malls, hypermarkets, multiplex cinemas) colonised the sites located at motorway entrances and created new suburban centres. Examples of this are Espai Gironès, a new shopping mall of 40,000 m² located on the outskirts of Girona, and Girona-Costa Brava Airport. With the expansion of low-cost flights, this has become Barcelona's second airport and a focus for logistics operations and offices developments. A parallel phenomenon is the commercial strip, that is, corridors of service activities (car dealerships, furniture stores, hotels) alongside highways due to the proliferation of zone plans without any overall strategy for territorial coordination.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined a significant example of the major urban form transformations that have taken place in Catalonia over the past three decades. In the Girona region in particular, the magnitude of the process was striking. A total of 522 zone development plans were approved and nearly 6,000 ha were urbanised. This process had two components. The first of these was the growth of core cities by outwards extension from the original compact urban area. The second relates to new suburban expansion consisting of low-density residential areas, industrial parks and shopping centres, specialised in function and spatially segregated from the urban grid. In coastal areas, the process was marked by the hyperspecialisation in second-home housing estates, many of which were spatially dispersed.

In planning terms, the outcome of this phase was inconclusive. On the one hand, a new practice of compliance with the law was imposed. But the new planning model was also compromised in three basic ways. Firstly, by the inertia effects due to the physical legacy from the previous phase. Secondly, because many local plans were oversized. Thirdly, as a result of new strategies aimed at modifying plans according to the individual needs of developers. Thus, this new phase of market deregulation, acceleration of economic change and urban sprawl spawned a new crop of expansion plans and more flexibility in managing them in order to accommodate «just-in-time operations». This reflected the fact that many town councils were wedded to urban growth as the main tool for development, while the regional administration had been reluctant to establish coordination guidelines as a framework for local planning.

After a change of ruling party within the Catalan government in 2003, a new set of regional land-use plans was implemented, specifying growth rates and land use guidelines that local plans were required to observe. The recession that hit in 2007 should also encourage us to reflect further on the possible limitations of our recent urbanisation model.