

INCREASE OF DWELLINGS AND RESIDENTIAL CHANGES IN THE BASQUE COUNTRY (1991-2011). MANY EVIDENCES OF URBAN SPRAWL

Roberto Torres Elizburu

Departamento de Geografía, Prehistoria y Arqueología. Universidad de País Vasco UPV/EHU
roberto.torres@ehu.es

I. INTRODUCTION

Housing studies in Spain gained relevance during the first years of the 21st Century, when the disproportion of the national real-estate activity started to appear, which was far above the one registered in neighboring countries. The percentage growth of the housing stock in Spain was far more superior to the population growth, since a lot of dwellings were bought in order to invest in family savings. The constant growth of the housing prices during those years fed the real-estate bubble. Besides, the land management plans approved during that period were focused to meet that demand, thus setting out very important expansions of the building land.

The negative territorial consequences of this big urban expansionism were soon evident on the Spanish territory, especially on the provinces located around Madrid and on the Mediterranean coast. Large areas of rural land were made artificial very rapidly in order to intend them for urban uses, which were being situated even furtherer from the main urban areas. The model of the traditional compact city started blurring and the new limp and discontinuous urban sprawl fabrics gained strength. Even though this urban pattern arrived later in Spain than in other European countries, it has been consolidated in a brief period of time driven by the excessive real-estate growth of those years.

The Basque Country is one of the seventeen Autonomous Communities which form Spain. With respect to the spatial surface, the Basque Country is one of the smallest (7.234 km²), but it is very crowded (2.179.815 inhabitants in 2011). It is located in the north, on the coast of the Cantabrian Sea and next to the French border. It is formed by three provinces, Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa on the coast and Araba in the interior. It has an average density of 301 inhabitants per square kilometer but it has significant internal contrasts, since Bizkaia almost doubles this number whereas Araba nearly reaches the third part of it. The urban structure also shows varied situations. In Bizkaia, the urban agglomeration of the Metropolitan Bilbao

which forms an urbanized continuous alongside the Nervion River gathers almost the 75% of the provincial population. Gipuzkoa has a more balanced urban network formed by medium-sized towns spread on the main valleys. In Araba, which is the less populated province, its capital city Vitoria-Gasteiz gathers a big amount of the inhabitants while small villages with little population prevail on the rest of the territory.

The small territory of the Basque Country is articulated by a thick road network that allows a good accessibility to the majority of its municipalities. However, the physical constitution of the territory shows some obstacles for the urban settings, especially in the crowded and mountainous Atlantic watershed. Here, the flat lands are reduced to narrow valley bottoms and coastal plains. Basque society has an elevated socioeconomic development with one of the biggest levels of income per capita of the country, even though it suffered from a serious increase of housing prices which obstructed many social groups from buying during the times of strong growth.

II. CHARACTERISTICS OF HOUSING IN THE BASQUE COUNTRY

This work studies the dynamism of the housing stock in the Basque Country between 1991 and 2011, thus including the whole period during which the last expansive real-estate cycle happened. First of all, it is important to explain that the patterns were less developmental in the Basque Country than in other Spanish Autonomous Communities, since the relative increase in the number of houses remained below the Spanish average. Nevertheless, the disconnection between the considerable urban dynamism and the low population growth is unquestionable in the Basque Country. Besides, the high level of land occupation has to be taken into account, which occurred as a result of an early industrialization and the physical limitations of the Basque territory, where the urban development pressure has caused important transformations during the last two decades.

For this research, statistical data about dwellings and their characteristics collected in 1991, 1996, 2001, 2006 and 2011 by the Basque Statistics Institute (Eustat) has been employed. Information about housing in Spain does not offer more frequent records, a fact which determines studying this phenomenon in more depth. In any case, the increase in the number of houses during each of the periods mentioned before will be studied, in order to know in which municipalities the largest developments happened. The transformation of building typologies will also be studied, that is, the dynamism of single family homes and collective housing situated in medium-sized blocks (3-10 dwellings) and big blocks (more than 11 dwellings). Finally, the change in housing uses will also be studied divided into being first homes, second homes or empty dwellings. All this information has been analyzed for each of the 251 municipalities that form the Basque Country, which are organized in different groups depending on the demographic size, the accessibility conditions or the relative position with respect to the main urban centers. This way, the role of geographic variables in the re-arrangement of the Basque housing stock can be known.

The housing stock in the Basque Country shows the biggest percentage of blocks of flats (89,4%) and first homes (84,5%) amongst all the Spanish Autonomous Communities; this is, it is characterized by its vertical development and its high occupation rate. This situation

stands out in the most intensely urbanized areas of the Basque Country, whereas single family homes and the ones that are not continuously inhabited are more common in smaller and more peripheral towns and villages. However, the behavior of the internal migratory balance points out that plenty of Basque families have moved from big towns to smaller and more peripheral townships during the last two decades. Simultaneously, the biggest increase in the number of dwellings has not taken place in urban and industrial centers as in past periods, but it has been rerouted towards these smaller municipalities located on the edge of the first ones. While the average regional housing increase was 31,7% in the municipalities of less than 5000 inhabitants has risen above 45%.

III. CHANGES IN HOUSING BETWEEN 1991 AND 2011

Consequently, population and dwellings have spread all over the Basque territory during the last two decades. This tendency has been guided by land management instruments; the Land Management Guidelines of the Basque Country, approved in 1997, wished to encourage a bigger balance in the spatial distribution of population and urban systems. In order to get this, they favored an urban development of second-ranked and third-ranked towns, thus causing important increases in the number of dwellings. A noticeable growth has also taken place in some townships located on the coast and on areas with a big environmental value, as a result of the natural and social amenities of these settlements.

As a consequence, the construction of dwellings has expanded towards less central spaces. Many blocks were built in small villages during the real-estate boom, thus deeply altering the original urban morphologies. Single family homes spread all around the closest surroundings of big cities, so that they could respond to a social demand for alternative typologies to the urban ones. This way, even though the construction of collective housing has prevailed during the last two decades, two developmental models have taken place simultaneously: a vertical growth of small and relatively peripheral villages and an extended growth of peripheral areas and traditional urban corridors, which are formed by row houses, adopting this way the typical morphologies of the Anglo-Saxon suburbs.

During the first decade of the previously considered period, the housing stock tended to be occupied more effectively, since the proportion of the first homes grew. The number of the second/summer homes has descended in the Basque Country given that plenty of them have been occupied by families which have moved from the big city centers to smaller and more peripheral municipalities. Therefore, while the weight of second homes has decreased on coastal and naturally attractive settlements, it has grown in some original urban centers.

Empty dwellings started growing from 2001 onwards, especially in those towns that showed a rapid real-estate growing. These dwellings reached an important dimension in lots of municipalities by 2011, since housing demand decreased drastically after the real-estate bubble exploded in 2007. This circumstance reveals that during the previous years a dwelling oversupply was happening, which did not respond to the population's real necessities, since many houses were bought in order to invest in household savings or reserve them for descendants. Economic benefits for private agents coming from urbanism -even for local governments, given that urbanism turned out to be their first financing source- encouraged this disproportionate expansion of the real-estate sector.

IV. THE INFLUENCE OF ECONOMIC CYCLES IN HOUSING EVOLUTION

The intensity of the real-estate dynamism was not homogeneous between 1991 and 2011, since it was subdued to the real-estate bubble that started to be formed at the end of the 90s, so building licenses increased gradually year after year until they collapsed after 2007. In Araba, the less populated province in the South of the Basque Country, the dynamism was late, but it reached the highest intensity once it was triggered. Meanwhile, the decrease was softer in the other two provinces and even a slight recovery can be glimpsed, as the growth was more progressive here. In general, the readjustment after the crisis has been more noticeable in those areas where the real-estate dynamism was excessive.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The main conclusion of the present research is that the population has been decentralized all along the Basque territory in the last few years, and this decentralization has been linked to the urban development of alternative spaces to the ones from the past. The percentage growth of the number of dwellings has been much bigger than the slight population growth, which means that the Basque Country has also been affected by the real-estate bubble, even though in a less intense way, in comparison to other Spanish regions. The number of dwellings has increased intensely in percentage terms in the smallest municipalities located at the outer edges of traditional urban areas. These settlements have experienced an important urban transformation, partly because extensive single family house sectors have grown, and partly because collective dwelling blocks have been built in small rural areas where low residential densities were more common in the past.

All the previous facts show that urban sprawl patterns have also affected the Basque Country, since urban activities have spread towards some areas located further away from traditional city centers and corridors, thus adopting limper and more fragmented urban morphologies. This process has been linked to an excessive influence of the real-estate sector on the Spanish economy and it has been materialized thanks to the complicity of the land management plans. The Land Management Guidelines of the Basque Country have directed the real-estate development towards those smaller and more eccentric alternative urban settlements, and the housing-offer quantification mechanism has been applied too often, thus trying to maximize the developmental possibilities of each municipality. These guidelines were updated in 2012 in order to adapt them to the new socioeconomic context and adjust the housing-offer calculation model to real necessities. However, the excesses produced during the years of strong expansionism still remain on the Basque territory and it will be necessary to set up additional measures in order to correct the most injurious situations.