

PROJECTS OF (UNCERTAIN) REGIONAL INTEREST. INTERFERENCE IN THE HOUSING MUNICIPAL POLITICS IN EXTREMADURA

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I. INTRODUCTION

The fact of the global estimation of future scenes has improved the land-use planning correctly. The cascade planning, that establishes the prevalence of the region planning on the urban one, has allowed for the development of both cities and territories. Although it is true that the Regional Government has expressed the intention of organizing its territories in this way on its laws, it is also true that the implementation has been at the very least, imperfect. In the case of Extremadura the process has been completely unsuccessful due to the lack of Guidelines of Regional Planning (basis for the regional planning) and the scarce production of Regional Plans. The consequence is a fragmented and disconnected regional planning, against the intrinsic values of the land and strategic plan.

The Regional Interest Projects (RIP) means the last step on the regional planning in Extremadura. Nevertheless its production has been higher than in the past. Its flexibility and the quick process of approval make it much more operative. In our opinion, this demonstrates that instrument is seen as a foreign body in the regional planning. The similarity between the object of RIP and the Partial Plans (PP) makes it similar to an instrument of urban planning, having the added advantage of prevailing on the General Municipal Plans (GMP) or analogue instruments. An advantage that in the case of Extremadura has been increased due to the outdated state of the municipal urban plan.

In front of the difficulty in the approval of a new generation of plans and the difficult management of the current ones, the regional Government thought to launch the public

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housing politics through the RIP, despite of its former aim was not this. In fact, a good deal of the second Housing Regional Plan (Decree 41/2004, 5th April, in which the Housing and Land Plan of Extremadura 2004-2007 is approved). And the Special Housing Program (Plan 60,000) was possible thanks to the existence of RIP. This action achieved to reach very easily and quickly, a high amount of public houses, highly demanded due to the increased prices in the free houses. Nevertheless the excessive use of RIP as an urban figure has meant the scorn of the urban general plan. The emergency solution seemed to be a usual procedure.

II. REGULATION AND USE OF THE PROJECTS WITH REGIONAL INTEREST

The Projects with Regional Interest are highlighted among the instruments of regional planning due to its pragmatism and the nearly immediate concreteness of proposals. Its characteristics have made that those figures can be the most prolific ones in the real state sector, even in times of crisis. Its success is observed in the fact that ten out of seventeen regional laws in the matter of regional planning have included some instruments that could be considered similar to RIP in the field of the approval procedure, characteristics and objectives. Of these, practically all of them are situated on the last step of the landing scale, prevailing on the urban planning but subordinated to the instruments aimed to an integral urban development planning. One of the distinguishing elements and basic on our research is the potentiality of the RIP or similar instruments to promote houses and so, to participate directly in the creation of the city from a supramunicipal administrative scale. With the exception of the Canary Islands and the lack of definition of La Rioja, all the Autonomous Communities are able to intervene directly in the urban development (building of houses) of the towns, arguing a social interest. In Extremadura, as in other Autonomous Communities, there is an unclear border between the territory and urban planning.

From the beginning, the absence or obsolescence of the urban planning originates a significant advantage favorable to RIP. This is not a trivial issue, far less in Extremadura where there are few plans adapted to LSOTEX and the approval rhythm of new General Municipal Plan is stagnant. The development of RIP is not conditioned by the existence of urban instruments, meanwhile, the PP as development instruments have no reason of being without the approval of a GMP and the existence of land classified as developable. The celerity of RIP is based on this point, as if we compare the theoretical duration established by Law of the approval process of both instruments, they result to be similar.

In Extremadura, the experience on RIP handling, at least the ones concerning the houses building, it takes an average of 167 days (5.5 months) from the initial approval to the final one. In addition, it takes some time (about 2 and ½ months) from the previous and compulsory application of “regional interest” and its approval.

The field of application of each of the instruments is also a distinguishing factor. Meanwhile, the PP only can operate in sectors of Developable Land. In contrast, the RIP can be placed on any kind and land category, as they are able to modify the urban classification of them.

Finally, we should highlight on the fact that the recent reviews of the urban and territory laws form a clear attempt to disseminate the potentialities of this figure. Among the most

important changes we could mention the capacity of RIP to act on any kind and category of land, without exception, as well as the possibility to speed the materialization of programs of housing and its possible modification even in its phase of execution.

III. DEVELOPMENT OF RIP IN EXTREMADURA. STUDY OF CASES

Over the last decade, Extremadura has developed its Housing Politics around the figure of RIP. The region of Extremadura, from the approval in 2001 of a regulation framework on town planning and regional planning (LSOTEX), has started the handling of 44 PIR, nineteen of them were thought as groups of public houses and only thirteen got the final approval.

The regional Government aimed its housing politics, and then the RIP, at the more dynamic urban municipalities: the named G-7 of Extremadura (Badajoz, Cáceres, Mérida, Plasencia, Don Benito, Almendralejo and Villanueva de la Serena²) and some other agrovillages that were growing in population (Navalmoral de la Mata and Coria), as well as small villages favored by the influence of surrounding towns as Arroyo de la Luz (nowadays with a negative population growth) and Sierra de Fuentes, both in the surroundings of the city of Cáceres. Thus, cheap houses were provided in places with a higher building activity and in this way, the prices were stabilized.

The difficulties of these towns to adapt their urban plan to the LSOTEX, transformed the RIP into the perfect instrument to equalize the supply and the demand of public houses along the times of economic growth.

The actions to build public housing houses through the RIP in Extremadura has meant the development of 11,070 houses. In this case, the city of Badajoz is highlighted, as it meant 39% of the total, secondly, quite far, Cáceres, Plasencia and Mérida. The most populated towns in Extremadura have eight out of ten built houses thanks to the RIP, inserted in the Housing and Land Plan in Extremadura 2004-2007.

Concerning typologies, the number of houses are distributed among the Special Program 60,000 (50.7%) present in every RIP, the Plan of average house (43.5%), only missing in one of them, and the General and Special Plan of Social Housing (5.8%), with no representation in six projects.

If we pay attention to the year in which the RIP was definitely approved, we can realize that 2006 was the most prolific year not only in the number of approvals but in the number of projected houses in each of them. The year 2005 and 2007 are also important thanks to the acts that took place in the city of Badajoz.

Since the approval of the RIP San Isidro in 2009, the Government of Extremadura has decreased the impulse of building new public houses through the RIP. This fact is due to the change of the socioeconomic situation, in which we have passed from a “housing bubble” to a decadent sector. Nowadays the development of the social housing is much more atomized, I mean, the acts are much smaller and spread on the whole Extremadura.

² The projected RIP in the towns of Don Benito (RIP Vegas Altas) and Villanueva de la Serena (RIP Arenal de Santa Ana-Conquistadores) were not finally specified. The first one was cancelled and the period of processing in the second one was very long.

Table 1
SPECIFIED DISTRIBUTION OF HOUSES CONCERNING THE PLAN, MUNICIPALITY AND DATE OF RIP

| NAME | MUNICIPALITY | PROPERTY DEVELOPER | YEAR | HOUSES | SOCIAL PROGRAM | SPECIAL PROGRAM | AVERAGE HOUSE PROGRAM |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------|---|------|--------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| Los Rostros-Cerro Gordo | Badajoz | JOCA INMO, S.A. | 2005 | 2,750 | 0.00 | 63.49 | 36.51 |
| La Calzada | Mérida | VIASSA Y JOCA INMO, S.A. | 2005 | 714 | 24.51 | 46.92 | 28.57 |
| Entorno Estación Enológica | Almendralejo | GISVESPA | 2006 | 202 | 14.85 | 65.35 | 19.80 |
| Los Altos de Cantagallo | Almendralejo | HARTIZZA, S.A. | 2006 | 424 | 39.62 | 60.38 | 0.00 |
| El Junquillo | Cáceres | GISVESPA | 2006 | 1,992 | 0.00 | 35.14 | 64.86 |
| La Godina | Mérida | Residencial Villaemérita, S.L. | 2006 | 400 | 0.00 | 50.00 | 50.00 |
| Los Viñazos | Navalmoral de la Mata | GISVESPA | 2006 | 862 | 5.92 | 39.91 | 54.18 |
| Los Monjes | Plasencia | Albatros, S.L. | 2006 | 672 | 0.00 | 63.84 | 36.16 |
| Camino de las Huertas-La Data | Plasencia | GISVESPA | 2006 | 578 | 0.00 | 56.23 | 43.77 |
| La Granadilla | Badajoz | Inmobiliaria Municipal de Badajoz, S.A. | 2007 | 1,640 | 0.00 | 45.00 | 55.00 |
| La Tripera | Coria | Inmobiliaria Alcón, S.L. | 2007 | 291 | 34.36 | 32.30 | 33.33 |
| Residencial Pontones | Arroyo de la Luz | GISVESPA | 2008 | 250 | 25.60 | 66.00 | 8.40 |
| San Isidro | Sierra de Fuentes | GISVESPA | 2009 | 295 | 19.66 | 48.81 | 31.53 |

Source: Diario Oficial of Extremadura (Government of Extremadura). Own elaboration.

IV. COMPETENCE INTERFERENCE AND LACKS IN SOCIAL HOUSING POLITICS

The questioned RIP are not that way because their defendable social funds but for the indefensible forms of intervention –despite the pressure of LSOTEX and its Planning Law–, on the urban competences and the rightful decisions of the Municipal Government, when pretending “building a city for hire” based on building neighborhoods occasionally (which are allowed for some developers and are not for others) and massive (awaking the criticized concept of “urbanism of real state” of the best 60’s, although now, signed by star-architects), on protected undeveloped real estates, which contravenes the laws of the General Municipal Plan and disagrees with the proposals of land and urban planning, already approved in plenary session (Campesino, 2007:14).

Looking for in the newspaper library, a lot of examples showing the fails of this housing politics can be found. The perspective over the years has shown the important nonsense of building some PIR, as “La Cantera de la Olleta” or “El Muelo”, both of them in Cáceres. The first could be named as a real urban piece of nonsense, because it was about the building of 3,650 public houses (amount that was decreased. They were 5,000 at the beginning) on an illegal quarry (classified as undevelopable and mountain protected) for 2016 and that finally it was not carried out grandiloquent urban development, even for its authors, with important equipment (an outdoor auditorium for 37,000 people) which interrupted the city itself.

This last fact the “lack of connection and continuity in the urban layout” was one of the reasons why the High Court of Justice of Extremadura defended the thesis to cancel the macro project “El Muelo” which wanted to build 3,986 houses on undeveloped real estate included in Red Natura 2000.

The intromission of the autonomous government in the municipal responsibilities has provoked other similar sentences of the High Court of Justice of Extremadura. Nevertheless, some projects did took place, although with important shortcomings, as the mentioned above “El Junquillo” in Cáceres (Alonso, 2008). This has provoked some confrontations between the Municipal and the Regional Government. This is an example to understand the autonomous public housing politics, promoted through Projects of Regional Interest. On the contrary, there are other projects that have scarcely started the works of urbanization or if they have, there are not any constructed buildings.

The economic crisis together with the lack of planning and adaptation to the real needs of the public housing, have provoked the fail of the Housing and Land Plan of Extremadura 2004-2007. More than 11,000 houses were projected, scarcely half of them have been built.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The development of the public housing politics in Extremadura through the Regional Interest Projects has shown obvious deficiencies. In this process, the Government has obviated the principles of urban planning and the municipal competences, in order to impose a territory “logics”, which could make sense if an organizational scheme of regional model has been developed, through the absent Guidelines of Territory Planning and the Territory Plans.

These recent legislative modifications have allowed the autonomous government to act alone on the urban development of buildings. The necessary inter-administrative coordination, in favor of a coherent housing politics, has not taken place.

So, it can be said that the built blocks of public housing are more due to isolated actions than to planned politics of social interest, confusing the Politics and the Regional Interest. This has led to confrontations between the Local and the Regional Government, to clearly isolated and oversized residential areas and to unfinished projects or stopped by judicial sentences. The social mobilizations for very important cases, as the urban frauds that have taken place, show the incapacity of the Regional government to manage the Housing and Land Plan of Extremadura 2004-2007 through this figure.

The big groups of houses are isolated, unfinished, underused, as a witness of the past, much better for speculators, an example of waste of public funds in times of prosperity.

In conclusion, it is necessary to state that the nowadays conception of RIP, as an instrument of urban planning, fits by its flexibility and capacity of acting in the needs of a changing world like the current one. A fundamental instrument for the socio-economic development of any region, as it is based on the social interest. Nevertheless, its unlimited arbitrariness and bad-understood superiority on the municipal urban planning should be revised. According to the exposed, it can be gathered, that the use given to this figure by the competent urban Administration in the Public Housing politics of Extremadura, was out of all proportion and did not observe its objective of uncertain regional interest (at least so much as expected).