

THE ROLE OF THE AGENTS IN THE URBAN AND TERRITORIAL DYNAMICS DURING THE REAL ESTATE *BOOM* (1996-2006) ON THE ALT EMPORDÀ PLAIN (GIRONA)

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I. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to clear up the role of the agents that intervene on the urbanization processes, highlighting the constitution of a particular urban and territorial pattern. This issue is analyzed in a crucial period for Spain, the real estate *boom* years (1996-2006), and in a representative area of many other spots in the Spanish geography that, subjected to an intense pressure by the tourism, has later evolved to territorial patterns a lot more complex.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study of the role of the agents in the urban and territorial dynamics is based on in-depth interviews. The interviews were made to a series of key informants, spokespersons of different groups. Hence, twenty-five people from different institutions and organizations were interviewed: administrations, business and trade associations, professional bodies, unions and neighborhood associations and civic entities. Other personalities from the Catalan academic field were also interviewed. These interviews consisted in open dialogs, in which people interviewed contributed by giving their insight about a wide range of matters as the suitability of urban growths, its causes, motivations of different migration flows, tourism changes, the role of the different agents involved in such growths, the evolution of territorial dynamics, the future prospects, etc. From the reading of the bibliography about the actors involved in the production of urban space, and the content from the interviews, an inventory of the agents that take part in urban and territorial dynamics at the covered area was made: the public administrations (city councils and regional government), citizen platforms and

neighborhood movements, private agents linked to urban activities (landowners and real estate developers) and entrepreneurs from the economic sectors historically relevant (touristic and agricultural sectors).

III. THE ROLE OF THE AGENTS IN THE URBAN AND TERRITORIAL DYNAMICS

In what follows we will review the role that different agents play in the urban and territorial dynamics of the study.

III.1. The public administrations

The administrations acting in a urban and regional planning capacities in Catalonia are the city councils and the regional government. The city councils frame the general urban planning and manage its implementation from the different figures of the derived planning. In turn, the regional government sets the main guidelines in regional planning and conducts the control of the urban action.

III.1.1. The city councils

The interest that city councils had on the urban growth would have been, firstly, to meet the housing demand by the inhabitants in town. A second motivation will be related to the needs of the population in services. Another aspect of interest for the city councils was the collecting of land, in which they normally fall short, to locate facilities. But, despite these circumstances having more or less influence in the urban growth, the definitely key is, actually, the funding sources. The urbanization processes are a very important source of economic resources for the city councils, and, most of the time, the growing is made thanks to the income that they get. Thus, the city councils, because of the competences and autonomy that they have in that matter are the main elements in these urban growing's, since they are who, at first, approve the urbanization processes. However, their curse of action is frequently subjected to the difficult circumstances in which a lot of them develop their activities, without an appropriate funding. What is more, they are often feeling pressure coming from the private agents associated with urbanism, said pressure being sometimes too great for an administration that become to be too weak at a times. That is why a lot of times city councils are forced to encourage a expansive urbanization dynamic. This situation is depicted specially in communities with a low population, that usually function with a minimum structure and very few economic resources.

III.1.2. The regional government

In 2003, when the regional government went to the left parties, after twenty-three years of conservative governments, there was an important turn in the territorial policies of said administration, which implied the resumptions of the different regional plans, set by the regional policy Law from 1983, which was hardly ever performed. At that time the executive boosted a very ambitious regional and urban supramunicipal planning program, which had

a significant repercussion on the field of study. First, the Urban master plan for the coast system (2005) was approved. A little after that the Empordà regional master plan (2006) was also approved. Finally the Urban master plans for the Serra de Rodes (2006) and for the urban system of Figueres (2010) were redacted. The launching of the planning program was reviewed very positive in the interviews. The intention of defining land or the will of general agreement between all the parts that took part were highlighted. However, the vision of each of the plans was a lot more diverse. The feedback for the Urban master plan for the coast system was positive, especially because of its high functionality. In contrast, the Empordà regional master plan had a lot more mixed reviews. There were positive opinions, that highlighted the approach proposed, as the approving process, that was carried it out with transparency. Among the harsh critics, there were some that thought the plan was too restrictive and, in contrast, there were some others that thought it was too permissive.

III.2. Citizen platforms and neighborhood movements

There are citizen movements, in one hand, that act with a global vision, not always linked to ecologic positions, even when that is the view they have. On the other hand there are neighborhood movements in specific communities, articulated around neighborhood associations or around new platforms, which have grouped under its auspices different entities.

III.2.1. Citizen platforms

At first, in almost all the interviews the work of the citizen platforms was acknowledged. However, past these first considerations, there were voices that ending up their disagreements with the work of these movements. In the opposite positions a same idea were viewed: these entities tend to oppose to all change proposals and they have a very static position. Another critique made about the platforms was that they usually focus on very specific and marked projects, and they don't seem to be that belligerent with other matters, not so visible, but that have also an impact. The *Salvem l'Empordà* case is the most emblematic one. The trigger for its foundation was the great number of urban development's planned for the region in the new century. Apart from objecting every project, the formulation of a master plan for the county was asked for. The interviews led to the view that the role of the platforms is to generate opinion and point out projects that otherwise wouldn't have transcended, not at the same level that they did at least. In addition to this awareness-raising task, the platforms in the area of study end up serving a slight control task to the administrations. Finally, besides the role on the case of some specific projects, the performance of the citizen platforms helped the development of the supramunicipal planning, since the citizens movements chip in the start and speed up of different plans in said planning.

III.2.2. Neighborhood movements

In the interviews a positive view of these groups was noted, since it was quite new to see people that doesn't seem related to any political party or help conservation entities mobilizing.

These local entities try to influence in the city councils, opposing certain projects, or certain approaches to the urban development plans. Nonetheless, certain critics were also viewed, in the sense that these mobilizations have more to do with personal interests. However, there were some that didn't view this as a problem, but as a reflection of the citizen's involvement. Another element for analysis was the similarities and divergences between these local entities and the umbrella organizations. *Salvem l'Empordà* contacted with the neighborhood organizations from the different communities to get themselves coordinated. To most of these neighborhood movements, *Salvem* entails an important support that can help them in their actions, but more than anything provides the general framework for the demands.

III.3. The private agents linked to urban activities

On the one hand we find the landowners, who have the ownership of the non-urban grounds, both developable and non developable. On the other hand we find the real estate developers, who are the entrepreneur that boost the building construction, with the aim of getting maximization of profitability.

III.3.1. The landowners

In the area there were traditionally big landowners, absentee landlords the most of them, who agglutinates properties in different villages. This model, still persisting today, even if certainly thinned, would have drained today its capacity to conditioning the urbanization processes, since in this period procedures would have been made from the addition of little properties, uniting thanks to a series of transactions, and that are dependent on the land classification defined in the urban planning. At the same time, it is getting more usual for owners of land that can to be urbanized to not be part of the agricultural property, instead being investment vehicles that would have bought small properties with the large capital provided by the financial sector, cheaply, to centralize land. In any case, the role of the landowners tends to be one in which they wait for an offer of some property developer that wants to urbanize their lands, since that is the way they get biggest profit. In this processes, the bargaining power of the small property owner is very restricted, since if an agreement isn't reached, the project can go ahead without their involvement. However, land is not always bought to be urbanized immediately, instead sometimes it's bought by a group of investors, that wait for future possibilities. It seems like this purchase of land that can to be urbanized would have been a great money-maker business during all these years, aiding the increasing value of land and the surge of housing prices.

III.3.2. Real estate developers

The relationship between developers and city councils is key during this period. Nevertheless, the city councils don't see the developers as a determining agent. In that sense, the municipal representatives argued that the fact that these entrepreneurs are looking for profit with their activities doesn't have to be a negative fact and that in case, if their actions lead to certain damage, it would not be their responsibility to deal with it, but the regional

government. In the rest of the interviews, the degree of the developers' responsibility in the urban growths turned to be a very controversial matter. On the one side we had those who reckoned that a peer pressure was applied by the developers to the city councils, that also benefit from the lack of economical and technical resources and that they gain handsome profit at the expense of cause a great impact on the territory. On the other hand, certain voices granted a bigger responsibility to the administrations, since they considered that the developers are devoted, simply, to develop their enterprise activity, until limits established by law. In those years, the force of more globalized capitalism landed in the area, like in many others, replacing the local developer. This fact impacts in the spread in this ambit of real-estate developments by foreigner developers. The landing of the main promoters would have happened for different reasons: the housing market own dynamism of Girona, the excessive increase on the price of land in the more central areas and the potential growth liked to, for example, with the arrival of the high-speed train (AVE).

III.4. The entrepreneurs from the economic sectors historically relevant

The tourist entrepreneurship in that period would have started to see the growth with a slight worry, since it seemed incompatible with the touristic product that they want to offer. The role of the farmers would be linked to the one of the land owners, even with a very limited incidence capacity, due to the tough circumstances that the sector is going through.

III.4.1. The tourist entrepreneurship

Some sector representatives pointed that the spread of the urbanization turns out counterproductive for its activity, since it can damage the landscape, the great value of the area. However, they were also some who expressed that the building sector had been the engine of the economy, and that it wasn't convenient for it to be stopped if alternatives were not found. This dichotomy was seen again when the role of the second home was evaluated. On one side it was pointed that second homes don't have a role in tourism when they aren't part of the offer. Nonetheless, there were also people that consider them a source of touristic industry clients. So the vision of urban development's and second housing by one part of the tourist entrepreneurs would have been slightly modified, in relation to the tourism model transformations, with an improvement on its offer. There would have been significant changes in the accommodation infrastructure, as well as an upgrade and adaptation of the facilities, to fulfill a more rigorous demand. Another aspect that was indicated is the importance gain of the new touristic products, since they appreciate other sightseeing's apart from the sun and the beach. However, these new offers wouldn't have been a substitute of the beach as much a complement that helps maintain the levels of coast occupation and helps the increasing to the interior.

III.4.2. The farmers

The role of the farmers in the urbanization processes is a very passive one, since they are an element present a lot of times, as landowners, but with little chances of conditioning

the process. In addition, the role of farming landowners is constricted by the circumstances that surround them, which put them in a very fragile position. The agricultural sector is very constricted these days by the persistent decrease of the active agricultural population. The reason of this drop of population can be found in the lack of profitability, as well as in the lack of continuity perspectives of farms. The lack of profitability makes that farmers need to resort to pluriactivity, becoming service providers, inside and outside their sector. In other cases the farm is kept thanks to the part-time agriculture, that its practice at certain times, on the weekends or when the person is already retired. Given these circumstances, it seems difficult that when a purchase offer comes their way they won't accept it, and even more if we bear in mind the big difference between the agrarian performance and the prices that are paid for lands that can be urbanized.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The combination between so active roles of the urban planning private agents, the landowners and especially from real estate developers, and the very receptive position of the city councils is the main reason for the urban growth. This growth have helped satisfy both agents interest, since the property developers have been able to maximize their profits and the city councils have been able to get more economical resources, or land to locate facilities. In this context, different voices have claimed a more active role by the regional government, through the different agencies and means at their disposal (regional master plans, regional commissions, etc.), in relation to some proceedings go beyond the municipal level. The entities, for their part, have exercised a control of the administrations, achieving the removal or the modification of some projects that were planned by the council-developers pairing. The tourist sector and the agriculture, instead, seem to lose part of their leading role. This circumstance can be seen especially in the farmers' position, which given the difficult position that the sector is in, see themselves forced to sell. The touristic entrepreneurs, for their part, try to detach themselves from the growths, because it can damage the landscape, even though there are also entrepreneurs that seen as satisfactory the cohabitation between urban growth and tourism. In any case, the interrelation of all these agents' roles, which are in function of their areas of activity, competencies and interests, would have conditioned the territorial and urban dynamic in the study area. However, the conjunction of all of them can cause non-desired effects on the collective sphere (land use, landscape impact, mobility problems, increase of house pricing as well as difficulties to access them, etc.)