The vacant city: is there anything we can do?  
The case of València

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Abstract
The Autonomous Community of Valencia is one of the most markedly affected by the housing bubble unleashed in the Kingdom of Spain between 1996 and 2007. This cycle of building hyperproduction has generated a huge stock of housing (largely not sold) and infrastructures (especially for mobility: motorways, high-speed trains, airports...), as well as an excess of large public facilities (museums, sports and cultural facilities, etc.). But a fourth area of hyperproduction is often ignored: that of urbanized land, with all the conditions to be built, that in quantities much greater than those that the market can absorb remains today without any use, thus generating a new space that we can call the vacant or derelict city. Our goal is to analyse some cases of "empty cities", selected as representative of these enormous extensions (thousands of hectares) perfectly urbanized, with all services and facilities, which remain unoccupied, to finally consider the options that are opened for its recovery and use.

Keywords: Real Estate Bubble; Overproduction; Derelict City; Land Restoration.

1. INTRODUCTION

If we accept that a city is not only the built fabric but also the people that inhabit it, the activities that there take place, its history, its natural conditions, we could conclude that the enormous areas of empty urbanized land that today dot the territory of the Spanish State are just that: empty urbanization, not empty cities. But if we consider that they were born with the will to become cities, it will be understood why we have characterized them as empty city, failed city. In what has been known as the “prodigious decade” [1] or the “real estate tsunami” [2], an unprecedented expansion of the construction sector beginning in 1996 took place. The result, when abruptly in 2007 the bubble burst, offers a panorama that we could succinctly describe as the scenography of excess, of waste. A landscape of oversupply of all types of built outcomes: housing, infrastructure, equipment and urbanized land. We will focus on the latter, giving special attention to the thousands of developed hectares that today remain unused, but limiting our field of study to the Community of València, one of the 17 that currently make up the Kingdom of Spain.

1.1 Beyond quantitative balances and theoretical models

For the construction sector, and for society as a whole, the crack of August 2007 meant the sudden awakening of the chimera in which it was installed. A collective shock that has not yet been fully recovered: construction paralyzed, unemployment triggered, banks have to be bailed out, emigration ceased to finally reverse... an unexpected collective drama. It is not surprising that researchers (including the international press) have devoted time and effort to analysing the causes of this collapse and the consequences of all sorts. Publications abound, but the overwhelming majority have focused, after formulating an explanatory model of what happened, in presenting a quantitative balance, a sort of inventory of the disaster; few have however come to consider the
issue from an architectural or urbanistic point of view, and less yet to propose alternatives for an exit from this impasse.

2. VACANT URBANIZED SOIL, REASONS FOR HYPERPRODUCTION. THE CASE OF VALÈNCIA

The Autonomous Community of Valencia (23,255 km², 5,000,000 inhabitants in 2014) became during the construction boom a privileged laboratory for testing a new urban management model. The experiment started in 1994, when a new urban law was approved. This new regulation allowed those who would henceforth be called “urbanizing agents” to carry out the development works without having the ownership of the land, and even against the will of the former owners. Known by its acronym LRAU (“Ley Reguladora de la Actividad Urbanística”, 6/1994, 15th November, Generalitat Valenciana), granted powers for such developers to set unilaterally the amount that the landowners were obliged to pay for the works. The conditions were set for production to soar, while abuses and corruption became widespread [3]. This legislative innovation, together with the permissive attitude of Public Administrations, resulted not only in an unprecedented urbanization boom but also in the loss of hegemony of the landowners (who until 1994 had been the dominant actors in the construction of urban space) and its replacement by these new “urbanization agents”, directly linked to the banking capital and to the main construction companies.

The result was impressive. When from 1997 credit flowed and demand overflowed, a construction bubble spilled over. Our objective is to transcend the quantitative analysis [4], in order to assess the characteristics of this construction binge, and specifically we will consider the possibilities of recovering the constructed stock, in particular as far as developed land is concerned.

2.1 A taxonomy of derelict city

Urbanized areas without building or use respond to extremely different situations and profiles. It is necessary, in order to evaluate the possibilities of action, to establish a previous classification with at least the following basic criteria:

i) Condition or phase in the urbanization process

ii) Property: public, private, social, banking...

iii) Financing and all types of burdens

iv) Location and connection to the existing city

v) Planned dominant use (residential, tertiary, industrial, tourist, facilities...)

vi) Existence of any partial building or use.

These criteria should allow us to elaborate a systematization of the existing different situations, so as to be able to propose alternatives matched to these realities whose social, urban and ecological impacts result in a heavy mortgage for society as a whole.

i) Phase or stage in the urbanization process.

In the current urban system we can distinguish four phases or stages in the construction of the city. The first one is the planning process, where design of urban is established. There is no physical transformation of the soil, nor hardly legal, being consequently a quite reversible process. Once all planning has been approved (at least with two levels, structural and morphological), a series of readjustments are made in the property structure to adapt it to the previously approved design. These set of operations are known as “parcelling” (dividing into new plots). Yet there is no physical
transformation, but there is a legal one. Once this phase is completed, the reversion process is extremely complex, if not impossible, due to administrative and legal reasons. The third stage is the one of the execution of urbanization works (infrastructures, paving, landscaping, lighting ...); it is when the physical transformation of the land finally occurs. Resulting lots can then be sold and, in a fourth and last step, built. We could even add an additional term, that of occupying the building and the implantation of urban life, in order to obtain something that we can fully identify as a city. Our object of study will be the lands that have reached the third phase, i.e. areas where urbanization has been completely finished.

ii) Property (public, private, social, banking...)
Many of the development operations carried out in the period 1996-2007 were done by initiative and with public capital. The different nature of the developer (public or private) characterizes ab initio the current possibilities of intervention. However, due to the multitude of bankruptcies and abandoned projects, it is necessary to distinguish between initial developers or landowners and whoever owns the property at present. There are many cases in which banks that financed the operation have become owners of these assets, perhaps against their will, from seizures of unpaid loans. This portfolio of assets, many of them considered "toxics", is today a hindrance on the viability of financial institutions. In November 2012, as a result of the European Union's bailout, a significant part of these toxic assets, especially those in the hands of nationalized banks or those that had been subject to public aids, were transferred to a joint venture corporation (55% private, 45% public) created for that purpose, known as SAREB [5]. This agency, popularly known as the "Rotten Bank", had got in 2013 more than 90,000 homes and some 13,000 hectares of urbanized land with the explicit assignment to proceed to its liquidation, by placing them on the market, even at the cost of assuming significant losses, eased with public subsidies [6]. These assets are actually a small part of the stock produced during the boom decade, but could be used as a test for further recovery and reuse actions in other cases.

iii) Financing and burdens of all kinds
In line with the previous variable, it is necessary to consider the loads and mortgages, mainly financial that hinder most of derelict land. Often the developing companies, created ad hoc for each operation, have been declared bankrupt, abandoning works and land, thus creating serious problems of public security and health to the City Councils. When development has been completed and partly built, the situation is even worse, since according to Jurisprudence Municipal Administration must provide all basic urban services, and even if only in a small part of an estate is inhabited, causing in this way a permanent and chronic financial deficit in local budgets.

iv) Location, connection and relationship with the city and the environment
The possibilities of reusing the derelict city depend to a great extent on its location, its connection and relation with the pre-existing city, as well as the environment in which these domains are located: rural, metropolitan, coastal, inland... It is in the metropolitan areas, in the surroundings of large and medium cities, where recovering these spaces is more viable; quite the opposite in the tourist areas, where the overproduction was more important, the thousands of empty hectares will hardly find a way out. The same can be said for most of the peninsular inland areas, with a declining population, although it is true that in those regions the impact of the building tsunami has been moderate.

v) Dominant Use (residential, tertiary, industrial, tourist, facilities...)
It is difficult, in the absence of detailed statistics, to assess the relative viability of developments based on their dominant use. It seems, however, that tourist uses have a more challenging future. The economic crisis has had an effect on reducing the chances of acquiring a second home by the declining middle class, which had been the engine of this type of building. Perhaps the current tourist boom [7] may partially compensate for this, but this avalanche can only partially be
assimilated to what has been labelled as *residential tourism*, since the present outburst of tourism mostly is that of short duration and high volatility.

vi) Existence of some type of construction or partial use.
It is not unusual that in the areas where the urbanization process has been completed, the construction works may have begun, but rather to what it may appear partial building worsens and hinders any intervention, entailing, as we have stated, a burden for municipal economies.

3. INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

Of all the real estate stock generated in the construction bubble, urbanized estates is probably the most difficult to recover because it is a raw material of the construction process, not a finished product and its "digestion" requires a demand that nowadays does not exist. These areas were intended to be built, something that as a generic assumption should be discarded, because, except for only very specific cases, urbanized estates remain vacant, and its absorption in the short or medium term by the market is not considered. One of the main appraisal agencies, TINSA, estimated in 2016 that there were urbanized plots for 1,565,000 new homes, and that at the current pace of construction, this amount of soil would be sufficient to supply the market during the next 8.6 years [8], a certainly optimistic estimate that other studies lengthen up to 30 years [9].

It should be highlighted that developed land cannot be stored at zero cost; its maintenance in conditions of being used carries continuous and considerable expenses. The new property structure resulting from the real estate storm is quite atypical, with new landowners capable of resisting without selling at loss for much longer time than the traditional small previous proprietor, and also due to the fact that developed land had had the highest speculative profile, and therefore after the puncture of the bubble has reduced its value to irrelevant shares. Banks can take more time without selling, without selling, given the abysmal fall of prices. In short, any "exit" for urbanized land requires knowing in detail its situation; there are no generic solutions, it is necessary to know its type, location, quality, destination, planned use...

The prospect of thousands of urbanized derelict hectares invites to discouragement, pessimism, to opt for inactivity, to expect better times. If so happens, these areas will gradually become abandoned territories, will deteriorate gradually to become real ruins, modern ones but ultimately ruins [10]. Let us emphasize that abandonment is not gratuitous or innocuous, it is extremely costly. The costs of all kinds are considerable: ecological, financial, administrative, legal, landscape... It is therefore necessary to consider on the intervention strategies that can be proposed in order to solve this situation, if anything can be done.

Which alternatives have been proposed to reduce the costs and impacts of the empty city?

a) Wait and see
The first one, institutionally adopted, it is to "wait and see". Let time pass by until the market digests the stock. In Gaja [11] I analysed this option and tried to prove that it was not feasible. At the current pace of assimilation, at least 25 years could go by for the housing stock; and a much longer term, practically uncountable for the land. And this without considering, in addition to the impacts previously pointed out, the deterioration already noticeable of many extensions of "empty city" that will eventually expel them from the formal market.

Despite its limitations, its ineffectiveness, the option to "wait and see" is by sheer indolence the most widespread. Better times shall come; the market will end up digesting the stocks of soil ... these assertions are often heard in the media, and even among academics and qualified professionals. The rational for its defence foresees a hypothetical scenario of recovery of the demand, in which the empty plots would finally enter the market. Quantitative studies share a
common failure: they do not distinguish the characteristics of the estates, as we have tried to do with our taxonomy [12]. The horizon thus estimated is based on the current rate of intake of the best lands by the market, but there is a significant remnant that they will never do so. As time pass by, they will degrade, becoming what has been aptly labelled as real estate corpses. In addition, this option starts from a mistaken hypothesis, a conceptual error: that of considering that we are facing a cyclical or conjuncture crisis, when its real nature is systemic. The crisis is the most conspicuous manifestation of the exhaustion of a model of permanent, supposedly infinite growth. For the mere passage of time we shall not return to "normality", understood as the pre-crisis situation.

b) Reuse
When development has been completed, but no building has occupied the plots two other alternatives can be suggested: its reuse or its demolition. The option of reusing it, changing its planned uses and conditions, despite being the most obvious and immediate, enjoys a lesser standing. This is a continuity option in the sense that it supports the absorption by the market, somehow recovering “business as usual”, with adds of all kinds of economic, legal, fiscal, administrative benefits and improvements; but let's dispel doubts: this option is not always feasible or desirable. Without discarding it from the inception, it will be necessary to draw up a detailed inventory of the vacant spaces and decide which ones can be "rescued" and which ones cannot.

c) “De-urbanization” and Environmental Restoration
From a social and environmental point of view the most appropriate option where the urbanization operation has negatively altered the landscape and the ecosystem without concluding with its construction, is the de-urbanization (or counter-urbanization), to say in plain words: the demolition of all the works with the restoration of the previous state. The difficulties in order to do so are colossal. Apart from possible compensations, there is the decisive fact that in most of the cases where development has concluded, some building may have been erected, even partially. The option of removing the urbanization works, eliminating infrastructure and recovering agricultural or natural uses is extremely expensive: who pays for de-urbanization, soil decontamination, adaptation to new uses? It is legally controversial: how is it going to be imposed against the opinion of landowners? Technically complicated: the raising of works may require intervention in deeper layers; and politically and socially difficult to accept by citizens not acquainted to this type of actions: how to explain them that the destruction or removal of works, means the recovery of previous values?

The success and viability of restoration operations will largely depend on the stage of urbanization (those we have identified as administrative, legal-economic, physical, building, or social phases), but in any case this option should not be discarded. In the first phase, in the planning stage, the costs of the reversion are minimal, hardly limited in the worst case to the compensation of technical projects. Once you have entered the second one, the management phase, difficulties grow exponentially. If this level has been completed, with the registration of the new plots in the Land Registry, it is still legally possible to retrace the path but the social conflict and the amount of possible compensations may have been rocketed. If we are in the third period, if the land has already been physically transformed and the demolition has to be carried out, the compensation will normally be extremely high, probably unapproachable; therefore this option can only be undertaken in cases of exceptional value, or when the property has breached its obligations or commitments. Finally, it has little or no sense at all to propose de-urbanization if the estate has already been occupied by building; these type of operations known as Urban Renewal are only economically viable if the capital gains allow them.

d) "Agrarize": the danger of intensive industrial agriculture
Some urbanized spaces could be recovered for agricultural production, without the need to de-urbanize them. Let’s not forget that we are dealing with areas with all the infrastructures required by law (road access, water supply and disposal, lighting, gardening, public facilities, etc.). It is quite
possible that some of them are not really necessary or that they are too costly to maintain (children's playgrounds, landscaping and gardening, telephony or internet lines, gas networks, etc.), so that a process of infrastructure reduction could be advisable if the area is to be re-agrarize.

The estates to be agrarized, to be reconverted into productive agricultural spaces, may be especially suitable for intensive plantations, in better conditions than the usual chaos of the greenhouse zones that make up the so-called "plastic seas". The most immediate image of these greenhouse areas are those vast plastic seas that today characterize the landscape of southern areas of the Iberian Peninsula, built for the most part without any order or infrastructure. But is it industrial agriculture a sustainable option? When proposing this exit for some urbanized estates, we cannot ignore the controversy, agronomic and ecological, that surrounds it. Industrial agriculture, or intensive agriculture, is fraught with all kinds of risks, and cannot be accepted as an alternative without previously discussing its impacts and effects. Faced with the option of implementing industrial agriculture in vacant urbanized land, it may be considered for plots that have got the entire infrastructure the alternative for traditional intensive agricultural model, such as the vegetable garden territory surrounding the City of València.

e) Urban gardens
A variant of intensive re-agrarization, with low ecological and sanitary risk, is the increasingly widespread option for leisure urban vegetable gardens. There are numerous cities in which neighbours or local administration have undertaken initiatives for the implementation of small agricultural areas managed by individuals, in a non-professional way, with the goal of enjoying the activity and self-consumption. However, the convenience of this initiative should not lead us to think that we have the ultimate solution for the excess of urbanized land; only land close to or nearby residential areas are likely to be suitable for this use.

f) Expropriation
Finally, a coercive change of ownership, expropriation, with the transfer to the public domain of urbanized and abandoned estates should not be ruled out. These areas could be reuse as public facilities or for alternative urban uses: industrial, tertiary or productive uses, renouncing the dominant and redundant residential project.

4. CASES OF STUDY

The crack of 2007 has been a social shock, not yet fully recovered. Despite the emergence of some social movements, v. gr. the "Indignados", that challenges the present state of things, a vast majority of population has settled in pessimism, in fatalism or in the best of cases in endurance and resignation until the storm goes by, although the crisis is already lasting for ten years.

After the multiple and imperative analysis on the causes and consequences of the real estate boom, it is time to move from lament to action, from protest to proposal. We have selected a couple cases, representative of the situations heretofore mentioned, located both in the Autonomous Community of Valencia, given the peculiar conditions in which the constructing tsunami developed in this territory. The aim is to show the current condition of these spaces, and then to ponder over some ideas about potential interventions. The initial selection included a primary residential estate of public initiative, semi-consolidated, in a metropolitan environment (Sociòpolis); one tourist area, a private enterprise, on the coast (Belcaire); two public development projects, one industrial (Parc Industrial de Sagunt) and another one tertiary (ZAL of the Port of València), but limits of space have forced us to present only the cases of Sociòpolis and the ZAL, representative enough of the possibilities of intervention.
4.1 Sociòpolis: a residential estate

The case of Sociòpolis exemplifies a good specimen of the "wait and see" strategy. We must point out the singularities of this example. Initiated in 2002, it is a promotion of initiative and public capital, where the bankruptcy of the promoter is ruled out. This plan (as in the other one selected) was carried out against all opinions: that of the majority of professionals not involved [14], the landowners, the neighbours, even the media. Held up as a novel project, an experimental ecoquartier, which sought to integrate urban and agricultural environment, enjoyed firm media coverage in international forums (Vienna Biennial, MOMA Exhibition in New York...). No expense was spared in hiring the cream of the architectural star system (Toyo Ito, MVRDV, Greg Lynn FORM, Kim Young-Joon or Duncan Lewis, among other invited members).

In 2013, with the development finished, barely 22 % was built (2,800 houses on its 35 hectares; 5 out of 18 planned towers) but most of them remaining vacant [15]. Today the estate languishes awaiting better days, while no action is being taken to overcome this lethargy, and its increasing and unconcealed deterioration [16].

The defence of the initiative by its promoters has stuck on a boutade. Starting from an undeniable fact, the reduction of the agricultural space that surrounds València (20% in the previous decade) they did come to the ridiculous proposal that "the city can only preserve its countryside by turning it into urban land". In view of the inefficiency of the strategy of letting time pass by, in this case the most reasonable alternative would be a change of use, recovering its original one or adapting it to implement a zone of urban agricultural gardens, as it partially was in the initial project.
4.2 ZAL: a third sector productive zone

ZAL (acronym, in Castilian, for Logistic Activities Zone) is perhaps the best example of an operation carried out in front of and against an unprecedented social mobilisation in the City of Valencia, which has ended in a resounding fiasco, in all orders, today remaining empty and waiting for an alternative that does not arrive.

In 1994, the Port of Valencia, the City Council and the Valencian Autonomous Government signed an agreement to develop a ZAL in the agricultural lands of La Punta, [18] commissioning SEPES (acronym, in Castilian, for State Society for Land Development and Equipment), who ended all works in 2005. It was the starting point of a social conflict of unusual dimensions, which would show the arrogance and inflexibility of Public Administrations, and their stubbornness in pulling forward an initiative against all reasonable opinions and criteria. There is no urban operation that has generated more conflict and rejection on the part of the landowners than the ZAL. We cannot, in the brief space that we have, give detailed account of the iter of this project, let's point out that the neighbours were evicted from their camps by the Guardia Civil (militarised police), as it has been reflected on a film (A tornallom) [19] and a novel story (Mataren el verd) [20].

The rosary of abuses and arbitrariness that has accompanied the construction of the ZAL seems incredible. At the outset it was necessary to unprotect lands that in the Master Plan of the City had received the maximum protection for the rustic spaces, in a procedure full of irregularities and abuses that have led years later to the judicial repeal of the whole process. On three occasions (2009, 2013 and 2015) the High Court of Justice has come to rule the nullity of the intervention. But the damage is done, facing an unprecedented situation: the option of restoring a territory of public property and compensating their inhabitants harmed by urban action is in this case supported by several judicial sentences. An opportunity to try out new patterns of reversion of senseless projects; but unfortunately this does not seem the chosen way.

In 2008 with the all works completed, and in view of the failure of the operation, the Socialist Party of Valencia (PSPV) proposed its conversion into a technological cluster, making the most of the competitive advantage of the proximity to the port; a proposal that included the construction of 33 skyscrapers [21].

Throughout the two decades that the conflict has lasted, the environmental association Per L'Horta has been claiming the project to be stopped, and its subsequent reversion, with the restoration of land use [22]. A position shared by the current Mayor of Valencia Joan Ribó (elected in May 2015), when being the head of the opposition, but who now advocates a so-called "Solomonic" solution: maintaining the majority of the estate as ZAL and rezoning for agricultural gardens the area closest to the city; only about 2 hectares out of a total amount of 70 [23].

The position of the Port is the hardest and inflexible, keeping the project as it is despite the accumulation of adverse circumstances [24]. Its new president, Aurelio Martínez, put forward in November 2016 in the so-called Forum Europa, Mediterranean Tribune (a business discussion
platform) an alternative to unblock the operation. It consisted in a negotiation with the City Council of Valencia to, in exchange for the transfer of a green park area in the nearby neighbourhood of Natzaret, gain municipal acquiescence and to cancel their opposition to the project [25]. More recently, 17th March 2017, he presented another alleged Plan B, while explicitly stating: "All this, however, does not imply that it will be rectified. The ZAL will move forward yes or yes." [26]

Faced with the possibility of restoring agricultural areas, irregularly caught up, the statements of the President of the Port leave no room for hope, when he sneers about a possible restoration: "Reverting is an option. For me, perfect if I get paid, but they will at Manhattan price. With that money, I could buy half Valencia " [27], forgetting that the company he presides is 100% public, and that the capital gains he now intends to appropriate were generated thanks to the municipal action. It should not be forgotten that the total cost of the operation amounts to 160 million euros (not all disbursed by the Port) [28], a figure that would probably not allow him to buy half of Valencia.

The controversy remains open between those who consider that the area is irrecoverable: the Port and the Mayor, and those who continue to claim the cancellation of the project and the restoration of the area. Another reason of those who defend the irreversibility of the works is the (supposed) loss of fertility of the ground. It is the traditional pretext to justify urbanistic actions: deterioration. The most convenient nuances are also looked for in the last abrogation sentence of the process. The sentence recognizes the right of landowners to recover their properties, although the High Court believes, that "land can no longer be returned as it was at that time and urges the Generalitat to compensate landowners." [29] Confronted with them: the former landowners, farmers, supported by the ecological groups and some left wing parties [30], expropriated and expelled from their houses and fields, who after some hesitation have agreed to demand the full restoration of the zone.

The intervention strategy must be to restore the territory, its agrarian use. It will be said that it is expensive, and even impossible: it is not; there are precedents. The cost of the demolitions and the restoration to the previous state are perfectly viable, although the restitution of the irrigation canals and roads, or the replacement of the rural houses is certainly complex. But such action would have an exemplary effect if at the same time political, social and legal responsibilities were sued. Let’s not forget, as pointed out by Torres that "La Punta is still legally protected agricultural land, since the project was annulled by repeated judicial decisions (2009, 2013 and 2015), and although its reversion is possible, it would be expensive and slow "[31]. In the end, after 23 years of confrontation, of economic waste, of negative social and environmental impact, the space of the ZAL is just a useless urbanization, which even its maximum supporter, the Port, cannot use.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Although some possible actions have been outlined in the preceding lines, there is no other choice than to admit it openly: it is not certain that something effective can be done to recover these urban deserts. There is a *sine qua non* condition, which does not seem to be guaranteed: the determination
of the Public Administration to be involved in the restoration or reuse of these spaces somewhat that
today cannot be stated categorically. In spite of the change in the socio-political orientation
resulting from the May 2015 elections in most large cities and also in the most populated and
dynamic Autonomous Communities, perspectives after the two years elapsed, do not seem to induce
optimism. It is true that there has been a desire for change, but the real measures adopted in practice
are very scarce, declarations, manifestos, programs, plans ... and little else.

Let's not be naive: the reversibility of urban planning operations is very low, being an arduous task.
The few available experiences unequivocally prove that we are facing costly, slow, limited and
controversial operations, where only the continuity of a determined and firm will to change things
can lead to tangible results. But let's not fall into fatalism; into pessimism that invades society, the
recovery of these spaces is possible, even in a framework of scarcity of resources.

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