
The study of urban form in Spain

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Abstract. *This paper traces the history of the study of urban form in Spain, paying special attention to the work of geographers. A periodization is established in which Spanish contributions are related to the growth of towns, urban innovations and foreign intellectual influences. The first period lasted from the second half of the nineteenth century to the Civil War (1936-39) and preceded the emergence of academic lines of investigation. The second period lasted from the Civil War until the early 1970s, years of great urban growth with little consideration for the historic past of the town. The 1970s were a decade of reorientation. Many important foreign contributions were assimilated, especially those derived from French urban sociology, Anglo-Saxon urban geography, and Italian architecture and urban history. Since the early 1980s a more interdisciplinary perspective has emerged. The most important long-term change has been the development away from an initial dependence on French research to a greater acceptance of other foreign ideas. The study of urban form has become established as an important field among Spanish scholars.*

Key Words: urban morphology, geography, intellectual history, Spain.

A consideration of urban form has long been present in a number of disciplines. It has been stimulated by the growth of towns, by the problems that have resulted from this growth, and by innovations in the theoretical corpus of urbanism and urban planning. These factors form the basis for a periodization that helps to demonstrate and explain the development of the study of urban form in Spain. Although the part played by several disciplines is taken into account, research within geography is given most attention.

Before the Civil War

Throughout the nineteenth century and the first one-third of the twentieth century a

reorganization of the urban system took place in Spain based on the administrative division of territory introduced in 1833. This ultimately gave more power to the provincial capitals at the expense of other towns. The introduction and diffusion of rail transport brought the country together, created a new hierarchy of central places, and, in general, facilitated an economic process of modernization (Delgado, 1993). There was greater differentiation, firstly between urban and rural areas, and secondly among urban areas.

At the same time the initial stages of urban planning in Spain were evident. Such planning concentrated on the general processes of demolishing town walls and on the design of *ensanches* (extensions) to

walled part of town, were still regarded as a continuation of the town centre rather than as suburban growth. Together with the planning of *ensanches*, which began in Barcelona with the *Plan de ensanche* of the engineer Ildefons Cerdà (1859), plans for urban reform were widespread in nineteenth-century towns. These reforms normally consisted of making streets as straight as possible and improving the oldest areas of the historic part of the town.

Three developments contributed to increasing consciousness of historic urban form: firstly, the *desamortizaciones*, a change in ownership of a great part of urban (and rural) ecclesiastical property, which went into public or private hands (from 1836, with the decree of Mendizabal); secondly, the demolition of city walls; and thirdly, the processes of inner-city reform in some towns. The *desamortizaciones* led to changes of use for the architectural heritage of all towns, without exception, and brought about the destruction of many important buildings. The other two factors meant the destruction or disfigurement of the historic street system and buildings.

All this contributed to the emergence of an incipient conservationist awareness among groups of scholars, academics and professionals which crystallised in various actions (Ganau, 1996). The initial concern for conservation derived, at least in part, from processes of *desamortización*, and culminated in the creation in 1837 of the Comisiones Provinciales de Monumentos with the objective of making an inventory of and protecting heritage. These *comisiones* were inspired by the French model of the Commission des Monuments Historiques. The work done by these organizations varied greatly from province to province, variations that can be related to the personalities of those that played leading roles. All of them, without exception, had to contend with lack of funding. At the same time, other private organizations emerged, such as the rambler associations which appeared in the last one-third of the nineteenth century in Catalonia. These played an important part in the

growing popularity of natural and historic elements (Martí, 1994; Prats, 1988) and took on propagandist roles as defenders of architectural and historic heritage. In each organization, historians, art historians and architects took an active part.

This period, which comprises the whole of the nineteenth century, is characterized by the still very primary concept of conservation based on isolated monuments, frequently in rural contexts. A broader and more urban vision of heritage conservation came into being in the last years of the nineteenth century and in the first decades of the twentieth century. This vision can be related to the conservationist movements dedicated to the preservation of certain city walls and historical buildings threatened by urban renewal in medieval towns. In Catalonia, the Roman walls of Tarragona and the Roman and medieval walls of Girona were protected after years of public controversy as to whether or not they should be demolished (Ganau, 1996). In Barcelona, the opening of a wide avenue through the medieval part of the town, connecting the new *ensanche* with the harbour, encouraged conservationist attitudes. This culminated, between 1908 and the early 1940s, in the creation of gothic styles in buildings around the city cathedral (the *Barrio Gótico*), including restorations *in situ*, as well as the replacement of buildings whose original sites had been affected by street reform (Ganau, 1997).

Parallel to the emergence of conservationist attitudes and policies, Spain was penetrated by ideas on the conservation of monuments and urban planning based on historicism. The main channel for the penetration of these ideas was French thought and the French language. The first theoretical corpus on conservation that spread widely through Spain was that of Eugène Viollet-le-Duc (Ganau, 1994), which greatly influenced the ideas on architecture and the restoration of monuments of such notable architects as Elias Rogent and Vicente Lampérez. The former was director of the first School of Architecture in Barcelona (from 1852); the latter, an architectural

historian and a champion of the restoration of monuments in Spain, was professor at the School of Architecture in Madrid. But the ideas of John Ruskin, so similar to those of Viollet-le-Duc regarding architecture, so contrary regarding heritage conservation, took many years to spread throughout Spain. It was Jeroni Martorell in Barcelona and, years later, Leopoldo Torres Balbás in Madrid, who introduced their idea of conservation, in contrast to the practical ideas (supported by Viollet-le-Duc) of almost completely rebuilding monuments. Martorell played a fundamental role in the initial stages of conservationist policies in Catalonia from positions of responsibility within the administration. Moreover, Torres Balbás published, in his later years, the first studies on the form and layout of Hispanic-Muslim towns; these were pioneering works among Spanish morphological studies (Torres Balbás, 1970). The progressive familiarization of these authors, and Spanish architects in general, with the works of the Belgian Charles Buls and the Austrian Camillo Sitte led to the acceptance of urbanistic concepts in place of others more concerned with building.

These ideas became more and more accepted in time and led to the defence of existing towns against uncontrolled urban growth and modern urbanistic practice. This attitude contrasted with that prevalent in the nineteenth century, when ideas of an urban ensemble were scarcely present but there was a dominant concern for architecture, especially monumental architecture. Furthermore, unlike in architectural history, urbanistic thought in the nineteenth century had not encouraged theoretical reflections. The beginnings of conservationist thought have to be considered in relation to European urbanistic thought. In this sense, French intellectual influence was the key to the spread of ideas on architecture and conservation in Spain and continued to be so, as will be seen, until at least the 1960s, when influences became more diversified.

In the same way, in the field of geography, a very underdeveloped discipline

in Spain in the first one-third of the twentieth century, studies of towns did not really begin until the 1930s; all of them respected the French influence and, more specifically, the influence of the work of Raoul Blanchard. In 1929, the first French-style monograph was published on the town of Girona (Rahola, 1929) and in 1931 an influential article by Raoul Blanchard (1922) explaining his method of producing monographs on towns, was translated into Catalan.

1939-1970: the formation of an academic tradition

From the end of the Civil War to the final years of the authoritarian political regime of Franco, was arguably the most important phase in Spanish urban growth. A first period, immediately after the war, of stagnation and very moderate growth was followed by two decades of expansion and an increase in the volume of building, which lasted until the mid-1970s (Vilagrassa, 1990a). The formal effects on towns and urban layout were the appearance of new urbanized zones. These took on the form either of large, high-density, housing estates or low-density suburbs. Both generally suffered from a serious lack of public services and buildings. However, within the field of scholarship, the previously mentioned work of Torres Balbás stands out, as does that of his disciple Fernando Chueca Goitia (Chueca, 1977), and the urbanist Gabriel Alomar, who published on urban heritage conservation and the urban history of the island of Mallorca (Alomar, 1976).

Elsewhere, a line of thought began that concentrated on the history of urban planning. It culminated in an important synthesis on Spanish towns, proposing a periodization of their history and describing some of their most general morphological characteristics (García Bellido *et al.*, 1968). In the 1960s the rehabilitation was undertaken of the legacy of the urbanist Ildefons Cerdà and his *Plan de Ensanche* in Barcelona (Bohigas, 1963; Ribas Piera, 1964; Martorell, Florensa and Martorell, 1960),

undoubtedly an original Spanish contribution to world urbanistic thought. The work of Cerdà (1867) was reprinted in 1968, including an exhaustive biographical study (Etapé, 1968).

In a context of great urban growth, but continuing poor intellectual output in the study of historic urban form, the work of a number of geographers stands out. In the 1940s work began that differed from previous conservationist perspectives and applied work. It was essentially founded on ideas imported from the French school of geography. The two introducers of urban geography in Spain were two great masters of Spanish geography, José Manuel Casas Torres and Manuel de Terán (Casas Torres, 1946; Terán, 1942, 1946; Vilagrasa, 1991). The well-known French methodology starts with the urban site, analyses the form of the settlement and street network in relation to topography, continues with a detailed examination of the plan and ends with a description of urban functions. From the standpoint of urban morphology, these first works were characterized by a detailed analysis of the town plan, a more superficial discussion of building types and, as a conclusion, a general synthesis of urban landscape character. In this respect, although these studies were not as profound as some of those of the German school of geography, they did not differ much from those produced in other countries. A further characteristic was the incorporation of morphological aspects in a framework that included detailed analysis of the evolution of the population, and the study of functional aspects at a regional level, all of which contributed to a dilution of the strictly morphological content. As in the French school of geography (Pinchemel and Pinchemel, 1983), the multiple themes studied in the monographs on towns prevented for years the appearance of a strictly morphological tradition. Much attention was paid to urban form but under the constraint of a rigid scheme that included questions that were of little interest to morphology. This can be seen very clearly in the work of Joaquín Bosque (1962)

on the town of Granada, without doubt the principal research into urban geography at this time. In his work, the strictly morphological parts take up 42 of just under 300 pages. Furthermore, these pages are divided between the historical, functional and socio-demographic sections of the book; there is not a consolidated morphological section.

In the mid-1950s, various articles about districts of Madrid began to appear in the magazine *Estudios Geográficos*. They were nearly always written by disciples of Terán and their structure was always very similar: normally, a first part contained the historical evolution of the area and led into a second part describing the population and the present functions. A more and more explicit relationship was created between form and function in which the former was always dependent upon the latter. Physical form was seen as the result of adaptation over time to the socio-economic characteristics of the population and economic functions of each district. This approach was applied with great sensitivity by Terán himself in a study which compared the morphological, socio-economic and functional characteristics of two streets in Madrid; one was in a low-income district with its own commercial services for the neighbourhood, and the other was inhabited by high-income social groups and had central economic functions (Terán, 1961). This article was one of the few publications of this period in which morphology, and more generally the understanding of urban landscape, became the main objective of study. The social and functional contrasts between the two streets were viewed in relation to the plots and building types. In this case, the relationship between form and function had become an integral part of the method of study.

In fact, many of the doctoral theses directed by Terán in the late 1960s and published in the next decade, as well as a synthesis on the urban landscape of Valladolid produced by another disciple of Terán (García Fernández, 1974) display more and more attention to aspects of landscape, while they slowly abandon the tight classical

scheme introduced more than 40 years earlier by Blanchard.

The 1970s: political crisis and intellectual opening

The decade of the 1970s deserves specific treatment for various reasons. On the one hand, a period of crisis began in the second half of the decade which led to a deceleration in the amount of building construction and the end of rapid demographic growth. On the other, the disciplines concerned with the study of towns underwent important conceptual and methodological changes. The backdrop was a deep political and economic crisis, as well as one of values, which developed in the final years of the Franco regime and in the first years of transition towards democratic politics. In the academic world, towns and urban topics were mostly viewed in relation to politics and social problems. The uncontrolled growth of earlier decades, which had created a serious lack of services and urban infrastructure, was denounced, and the urban social movements that were so strong at that time were supported. At the same time, a fundamental opening up of Spanish science took place. Foreign innovations were assimilated with greater ease and they had more diversified origins than previously. In geography, French influence began to be shared with that of the Anglo-Saxon countries (Capel, 1976). Moreover, urban geographers became more aware of other disciplinary contributions, including those by the French sociological school, particularly those by Henri Lefebvre, Christian Topalov and Manuel Castells, a Spaniard then residing in Paris. Within architecture, the influence of Italians, such as Saverio Muratori, Aldo Rossi and Carlo Aymonino, stands out; much of their work was translated into Spanish.

Many of the works encouraged by Manuel de Terán in the Universidad Complutense in Madrid, and which appeared in the 1970s, dealt with new elements in the urban landscape. Aspects were considered that would prove important in later analyses.

These included planning history and the structure of property (Brandis, 1983; Mas, 1978, 1979, 1982; Rio, 1984; Ruiz, 1976), which were to form an important part of the explanatory framework of urban growth in Madrid. Plots systems, building types and housing were now described in more detail.

At the same time, at the University of Barcelona, another group of geographers came together to study urban form, led by Horacio Capel. His book *Capitalismo y morfología urbana en España* (Capel, 1975) is regarded as one of the most relevant, synthetic contributions of geography to the study of towns. Of greatest interest in his book is the interrelationships that he establishes between urban form (using a typology of residential areas widely used in later years), the legislative framework for the development of urban policies and the strategies of the agents producing urban space. The theoretical framework is derived, in part, from French urban sociology, strongly influenced by Marxism (especially Topalov, 1973, 1974), but with a major effort to translate social strategies and urban policies into urban landscapes. However, there is little reference to morphology in this book. The emphasis on groups, structures and mechanisms provides a basis for a well developed theory about urban agents, but the morphological typologies presented are still lacking specificity and are not well developed. The relationships between agents and landscapes are not explored in detail. Nevertheless, from the viewpoint of the study of urban form the value of the book is considerable, since it suggests channels of research that allow an urban morphology infused by social meaning.

A number of studies supervised by Capel that appeared in the 1970s are valuable approaches to morphology in addition to going deeper into the production and consumption of space (Carreras, 1974, 1980; Tatjer, 1973). It is possible to recognize features common to them: attention to the functional characterization of the area studied; explanation of this in terms of recent history and, very often, the processes of

nineteenth-century industrialization; attention to the structure of property and, consequently, plot types; and the inclusion of planning and urban policies as elements in understanding the strategies of urban agents and as a link between them and the landscapes that finally appeared. However, although the word 'morphology' is used profusely, morphological analysis is, once again, a relatively peripheral element. Data are provided on built-up areas, building heights, and shapes of plots, but the fundamental interest lies more in understanding the processes of appropriation of urban space than in understanding urban forms. There is frequently a detailed characterization of owners, industrialists, builders and developers, but without any systematic attention to the landscapes that arose from the actions of these agents. Nevertheless, some studies deal with morphological aspects in greater detail, giving attention especially to the study of urban property, plot characteristics and building dimensions (Tatjer, 1979). This interest coincides with that among urban geographers influenced by Manuel de Terán.

At the same time, in architecture and urban planning, new perspectives were developed which usually coincided with those of geographers. To understand urban forms that have emerged in modern towns in relation to the roles of urban agents (owners, builders, and developers) reference is necessary to the work of the Laboratorio de Urbanismo, led by Manuel de Solà-Morales (Laboratorio de Urbanismo, 1972), especially a research project on the urban landscapes of Barcelona and its metropolitan area that deals with the *Ensanche* (Solà-Morales, 1978; Noguera, 1978), public housing estates (Ferrer, 1996) and self-built suburbs (Busquets, 1976). The theoretical framework establishes a conceptual separation between plot division, urbanization and building construction. Urban landscapes are studied as products of these three processes and the roles of different agents are considered (Laboratorio de Urbanismo, 1976). For example, in the *ensanches*, plot division,

urbanization and construction are defined as different processes in which different social agents take part. However, in the construction of public housing estates, the three aspects can be viewed as a single process and directed by the same agent, the State.

In the field of architecture, the monograph of Linazasoro (1978) was also very important. It applied the Italian 'morpho-typological' method to the medieval centre of Vitoria and other Basque medieval towns, genetically explaining the plot system and the characteristics of building types. Although the ideas of Muratori, Rossi and Aymonino are well known among Spanish architects, the work of Linazasoro is an exceptional discussion and application of their methods in depth.

Since 1980: consolidation of a tradition

Since the early 1980s, Spanish cities have undergone internal change rather than growth of their built-up areas. This has been reflected in research. There has been more interdisciplinary activity, particularly relating to urban history. A number of conferences have helped to bring different disciplines together (Bonet, 1979, 1985; Claverol and Vilagrassa, 1987). Although most research has been undertaken by architects and geographers, there now exist very active groups of art historians and economic historians. The perspectives, however, are similar to those of the 1970s, involving either the same authors or their disciples. There is more attention to urban form and to other countries. The great majority of current work is concerned with one or more of three topics.

First, there is research on fluctuations in the economy and in the building industry. This is a theme which has been treated mainly by economic historians (Gómez, 1986; Tafunell, 1989), although they make few references to the role of the building cycle in the conditioning of urban form. In morphological study, building fluctuations have been used by geographers (Alió, 1986; Oliveras, 1986) and by architects (Larrosa,

1986, 1987). The relationship between building growth, periods of stagnation, the formation of fringe belts and the analysis of the town plan, drawing upon the contributions of J.W.R. Whitehand and the school of geographical urban morphology in Birmingham (Whitehand, 1972, 1991), has been examined in the last few years (Vilagrassa, 1990a).

Secondly, planning, urban politics and urban administration are an important triad. Studies of these topics have a long tradition in Spain. Attempts to record Spanish urban planning culminated at the end of the 1970s in an ambitious study dealing with the country as a whole (Terán, 1978). Since then, studies of the history of planning in individual towns have continued (Teixidor, 1982; Martín, 1990), sometimes related to local urban policies and their administration (Galiana, 1995). In the field of urban policies, work on housing development by public bodies is particularly important (Moya, 1983; Fraguell, 1988; Fernández, 1991; Dávila, 1993; Ferrer, 1996).

Thirdly, land owners, building owners and developers have been subject to a good deal of research. In this case, the continuity of the geographical schools in Madrid and Barcelona is the most noteworthy characteristic. Research on various aspects of the structure of property in Barcelona in relation to its urban history and landscape has been continued by Tatjer (1987, 1993). In a similar way, the relationship between the characteristics of urban property and the formation of urban layouts has been examined in the city of Madrid (Canosa and Rodríguez, 1985; Mas and Mata, 1991). Again, interest in the part played by developers has been evident in the last 15 years (Vilagrassa, 1986). Numerous studies have been published on the production of housing and buildings, urban policies, and the characteristics of individuals and companies concerned with urban development (Vilagrassa, 1997). Some monographs give special attention to the urban landscapes that have emerged (Vilagrassa, 1990b; Arriola, 1991; Bellet, 1995; Canosa, 1995). In

addition, an interpretation of the relationship between agents of morphological change and architectural styles has been attempted (Vilagrassa, 1992). The culmination of these lines of investigation has been an interpretation of the growth of contemporary Spanish towns, based on the study of land owners and developers, regarding both types of urban agents as keys to the formation and transformation of towns (Mas, 1996).

Conclusion

In this paper the emergence and consolidation of a Spanish tradition in the study of urban form have been described. Inevitably the brevity of the treatment and the disciplinary perspective of the author mean that what has been presented is a partial view. Emphasis has been placed on the relationship between the emergence of actual urban problems and the nature of academic investigations. Perhaps the most important long-term change in this field of research has been the development away from an initial dependence on French research to a greater acceptance of other foreign ideas. The combination of increased knowledge of foreign ideas and a long history of Spanish contributions to the study of urban form have firmly established this field among Spanish scholars.

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