

ALL THAT GLITTERS IS NOT GOLD THE MISUSE OF THE ECODISTRICT'S LABEL IN SPAIN

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ABSTRACT: Since the mid-1980s, ecodistricts have caught the attention of the academic world. By concentrating many of the features promoted by sustainable development advocates, ecodistricts represent an interesting attempt to go beyond the modernist – and unsustainable – vision of the city. In recent years we assisted to an impressive growth of ecodistricts' labelled projects in European countries and more specifically in Spain. Nevertheless, we demonstrate that in many cases, such urban programmes were mere smoke-screens which badly hid the financing of traditional housing projects with doubtful sustainable content. Assuming that a culturalist explanation in terms of “Mediterranean syndrome” is not acceptable, we argue that the misuse of the “sustainable development label” in Spain is due to a series of institutional mechanisms that generated such situation.

KEYWORDS: Ecodistricts, Eco-neighbourhoods, Sustainable Communities, Sustainable Development, Urban Policy.

INTRODUCTION:

Ecodistricts – also known as “ecobarrios” in Spanish and “sustainable communities” or “eco-neighbourhoods” in English (Van der Rhyne and Calthorpe, 1986; Rudlin and Falk, 2000) – are urban areas which integrate different technical solutions and ecological habits in order to minimise their environmental and social cost. As such, ecodistricts are now present in many European countries, more specifically in Northern Europe where local governments took very seriously the objective of urban sustainability from the late 1980s.

The main objective of ecodistricts' defenders consists in surmounting the actual problems posed by modern urbanism – a movement born in the early 1900s which now dominates the conception of cities' builders – through a strategy promoting urban sustainability from a threefold angle. From an *environmental* perspective the actual use of urban land which led to the fragmentation of housing is considered as a problem to correct. A related issue is the automobile dependence which largely depends on the distance between job and home's areas. Modern urbanism is also based on an unsustainable system of energy depletion which has already convert soil and water into huge inconveniences we need to solve. The pollution or destruction of ecosystems by large cities is the logical result of this urban pattern. From an *economic* viewpoint, modern urbanism has established a strong hierarchy of “winning and losing” cities by integrating them to the global market, and it has imposed a strong spatial segregation within cities and towns between ethnic, religious and economic groups. Lastly, from a *social* point of view, modernist urban planners and architects have failed to create a

sense of community and rather fomented a very negative “geography of nowhere” (Kunstler, 1996).

Literature on ecodistricts lies in different sectors of study like urban planning and architecture, urban governance and urban policies, and sustainable development analysis. According to some authors (Wackernagel and Rees, 1996) occidental cities are responsible of a high proportion of global pollution. European cities share a large part of responsibility, though their potential for implementing sustainable solutions is higher than in American cities as demonstrate the several eco-neighbourhoods that developed in recent years (Beatley, 2000; Portney, 2003). Despite there is a general agreement on the social usefulness of ecodistricts, their existence also generated certain critiques. Indeed, sustainable communities are sometimes perceived as “ghettos” for middle-classes (Da Cunha, 2007). In a similar fashion, the implementation of ecodistricts is sometimes considered as particularly complex to reach since the urban regime necessary to lead such policy must include a large range of economic, political, cultural and social actors (Stone, 2001). Thirdly, the enlargement of the concept of sustainable development has converted ecodistricts into a fuzzy category aiming to promote architectural and/or social and/or economic issues according to a more or less participative democratic framework (Redclift, 1987; Wheeler, 2006; Wheeler and Beatley, 2006). Lastly, it has been stressed that the term sustainable neighbourhoods sometimes hid unsustainable *praxis* for commercial reasons, especially in Spain (Del Caz Enjuto, 2003).

This paper focuses on this last critic by asking to what extent the ecodistrict label was diffused in Spain and why many of the Spanish eco-neighbourhoods follow unsustainable pattern of growth.

Assuming that there is no “Mediterranean syndrome” (Eder and Kousis, 2001) respect to sustainable communities in Spain,¹ we aim to demonstrate that the growing number of new “ecodistricts” in Spain is not a mere coincidence and was facilitated by the diffusion of such label at the international level, building a new but void concept. Nevertheless, most of “sustainable” urban programmes developed in Spain are mere smoke-screens which badly hide the financing of traditional housing projects with doubtful sustainable content. According to us, this is due to a series of multi-level institutional arrangements that privileged short-term economic and political profitability and ignored middle-term environmental costs.

This hypothesis is supported by a historical new-institutionalist approach (Ostrom, 1990; Pierson, 2000). Assuming that the urban environment is a common resource used by a large range of actors, this paper contends that local regulation systems have developed through time in order to avoid the neglect or abuse of this resource. The first regulation systems established (at time T0), while perhaps the ideal solution at that time, do not necessarily remain the best or most favourable solution for the future (at time T1). These formal and informal institutional arrangements define patterns which constrain and shape politics. Moreover, these patterns orient the evolution of different political sub-systems according to different routes (“path dependence” mechanism); the direction and course of these routes, however, is often difficult to modify. One can thus explain this “increasing returns” process by evaluating the costs involved by any tentative change, particularly when past investments were significant, and by the

¹ The choice of Spain was quite obvious since it led during ten years the ranking of European countries in terms of housing promotion. During that period, the terms “ecodistrict”, “sustainable community” or “eco-neighbourhoods” became increasingly popular.

increasing efficiency created by specialization. This does not mean that politics is condemned to incrementalism, but that change has a cost actors must be ready to assume.

This research was lead from October 2008 to March 2009 through semi-structured interviews with scholars, civil servants, journalists and political representatives, a general review of scientific journals and *grey literature* used by ecodistricts' implementers in Spain, and the reading of major regional and national Spanish newspapers. Since browsing the whole architectural projects launched in Spain from the 1995 until 2009 was an impossible task, we deliberately decided to centre on the advertising campaign for new buildings launched in the *El Pais* and *El Mundo* newspapers from 1998 to 2008. Among the thousand of projects using a green terminology we found a reduced set of programmes partially complying with the criteria of urban sustainability.² The elaboration of the database and the subsequent research were funded by the *Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales* through the post-doctoral programme García Pelayo.

This paper is articulated as follows. In the first part, we propose a general overview of the rise of ecodistricts as a new and fashionable “urban brand mark” for urban development. Then, we intend to establish a definition of ecodistricts as well as to present their development in Europe. In the third part we focus on the uncontrolled emergence of Spanish ecodistricts and on the institutional factors that provoked the development of these false sustainable communities. Brief conclusions seek to draw out the implications of such developments.

ECODISTRICTS AS A NEW GLOBAL “BRAND MARK” FOR URBAN DEVELOPMENT

As such, the creation of “ecodistricts” is now part of the marketing policy led by European cities. In an age of globalisation of goods and services where city actors struggle to catch resources on the international market, the “eco” label has converted into an argument more to attract and retain investors and inhabitants as well. In order to assess this trend, we decided to draw on the concept of *loci communes*. The *loci communes* are means for exciting the audience, and “eco” is one of the most popular ones since, at least, the 1960s. The “eco” term is a *cluster-label* that reflects the ideological contradictions of our age, a sort of re-description without any significant change. The “eco” term possesses a different advertising character from that which has been claimed for it: it is a performative description which serves at the same time to describe and influence the possible audience...and with the “eco” label the evaluation is always positive, whatever the real project is.

² Namely: Valdespartera (Zaragoza, Aragon), Policity (Cerdagnola del Vallès, Catalonia), Tetraener Andontegi (San Sebastián, Euskadi), Sarriguren (Pamplona, Navarra), Villa Mediterránea (El Tuyo-Almería, Andalucía), Santa María de Benquerencia (Toledo, Castilla la Mancha), Vallecas (Madrid, Madrid), Las Ventajas (La Alpujarra-Granada, Andalucía), Sociópolis (Valencia, Valencia), Galindo (Baracaldo-Bilbao, Euskadi), Trinitat Nova (Barcelona, Catalonia). In turn, we did not find any evidence of sustainability in the rest of projects such as La Favera (Villanueva de Gómez-Ávila, Castilla y León,), Valdechivillas (Valladolid, Castilla y León), La Ciudad del Medio Ambiente (Garray-Soria, Castilla y León), and so on.

Occidental cities as global polluters

Cities have been traditionally celebrated as a source of social progress, creativity and cultural diffusion (Girardet, 2004). Nevertheless, cities also share a considerable responsibility respect to actual environmental troubles that the world has to face. From 1950 to 1990, the world's urban population has grown by 200 million to 2 billion. By 2025, the United Nations experts expect that about 5.1 billion people will live in city areas. Moreover in 2025, almost 17% of urban population will reside in large cities of over 5 million people. There will be 71 megacities by 2015, most of them located in third world countries (Mumbai: 26.1 million, Lagos: 23.2 million, Dhaka: 21.1 million, Sao Paulo: 20.4 million...) where basic features to channel urban issues like rural migrations, waste and sewage treatment, schools, hospitals or drinkable water are already crucially lacking (United Nations Population Fund, 2001).

Beyond these prospective results, the United Nations calculates that up to 80% of people living in rich countries already live in cities or city areas. According to Rees (1997), approximately three quarters of the world's environmental problems are due to the presence of cities; and high-income cities, principally located in Western developed countries, impose by far the greater load on the global ecosystem. To be sure, Girardet (1999) evaluated the *ecological footprint*³ of the greater London at 19,700,000 hectares – an area almost as large as Britain itself. In other words, London needs a land area 125 times its size to meet its resource needs.

The diffusion of occidental urban value in developing countries is a related problem. Indeed, the American urban lifestyle – based on the separation between suburban houses' downtowns and business districts, two cars by family and low density cities articulated by efficient highways (Wheeler, 2006) – has proven to be unsustainable on a long-term perspective. Nevertheless, mass-media and occidental investments still tend to spread around this model around the world.

This is the reason why sustainable development studies cannot ignore cities. As the first polluters of the planet, their internal structuring and the lifestyle of occidental urbanites must be substantially modified in order to correct the actual path.

Defining ecodistricts

In order to take up the challenges of sustainability, ecodistricts have appeared in different places of the world. Despite the common “designation of origin” shared by ecodistricts, their objectives and forms vary greatly from one case to another. However, we argue they must comply with certain criteria in order to be considered as ecodistricts.

First of all, one of the main objectives of ecodistricts consists in increasing density and compactness – a concept traditionally confused with the issue of overcrowding. Nevertheless, as Alice Coleman (1990) points out, though modern high blocks give the impression of high density, in reality they are often built to relatively low density since

³ The ecological footprint calculus is a technique developed by Mathis Wackernagel and William Rees (1996) for evaluating the environmental “load” of an individual or a community by converting its resource consumption into the equivalent amount of land that would be required to produce such resources. Such technique faces several critics related with the usefulness of the statistics it provides and with its limited perspective on sustainability which does not take into account issues like equity and social fairness.

shops, parks, and public facilities dramatically low the relation people/km². As demonstrate the examples of the Vauban district in Freiburg or the Vesterbro district in Copenhagen, compactness and density improve the ecological efficiency of cities and reinforce the social relations among residents.

But the layout of houses is another important element of the ecodistricts' strategy. Considering the whole decisions related to housing cannot be let to the market, some municipal councils should intend to re-direct urban growth and zoning by putting nearer jobs, houses, commercial and leisure areas. In concrete terms, this means the classical division of cities into single-minded areas (city business centres, residential districts and industrial-commercial parks) is a source of unsustainability and should shift to mixed-use spaces where these whole functions are disseminated within a single district (Lynch, 1981; Calthorpe, 1986; Vale and Vale, 1991; Calthorpe, 1993).

For what regards the form, design and details of houses, housing promoters still continue to build houses for families made up of two parents with children while the number of pensioners, students, childless couples and single-person households is increasingly growing. More flats are needed and the whole areas of the cities must be used – including brown field lands and empty commercial space – as demonstrates the GWL-Project in Amsterdam. Specific mortgages can be proposed by municipalities in collaboration with banks to facilitate the access to less contaminated houses or to renovate old houses with better walls and roofs' insulation, triple-glazes windows, green roofs, solar panels, more efficient lightening, non-polluting materials and so on.

In the same way, transportation is an essential feature of ecodistricts. The main problem is automobile-dependence which is a source of congestion, accidents, noise, CO₂ emissions, ozone pollution, acid rain, cancer and so on. Reducing car-use is necessary and some key policies should be implemented to do it, viz. imposing traffic calming initiatives (barriers, S-streets, speed restrictions...), proposing alternative mediums of transport (buses, trains, tramways, metro, bicycling, walking...), reducing the need to travel by creating "land villages" (multimodal centres articulated by public transport) (Newman and Kenworthy, 1999).

Protection of open space is essential, not only by protecting non-built areas, but also by restoring contaminated lands. Protection and restoration of natural habitats are fundamental policies to maintain the biodiversity and save endangered species. Obviously, this is not a simple task since some species tend to colonise cities by ejecting other ones (falcons and rats for example), so how to define what historical and indigenous conditions to restore to? (Riley, 1998).

Resource use is probably the most important aspect of sustainable communities. Herbet Girardet (1999) uses the concept of "metabolism" to explain how cities use resources. The main problem is the metabolism of large cities is essentially linear while the metabolism of a forest is circular (outputs are recycled and become new inputs). The solution found in ecodistricts consists in saving resources and recycling it every time it is possible (water for instance). Solid wastes, before to be buried in landfills, should be recycled, re-used, composted or burnt to generate energy. This is the policy followed by a growing number of cities in Europe and particularly in Hanover in the Kronsberg district where many innovations have been combined to reach the objective of clean city (Tillman Lyle, 1994).

Energy use follows the same pattern. Though new technologies need less energy to work, the number of cars, fridges, computers, televisions...is growing. Indeed, cities need more gasoline and electric current to maintain their activity. Moreover, the loss of energy provoked by the transport of electricity from big power stations (for example

nuclear stations) can reach 40% of the total input. In Kyoto in 1997, industrialised nations agreed to cut CO2 emissions by 5% by 2010 (though a world-wide cut of some 60% was needed to halt global warming) but did not reach this objective. Although zero-emissions' cities are still impossible to build, the solution implemented in ecodistricts is a threefold one. First, energy consumption is reduced through the use of new technologies (providing better insulation to houses), new life-habits and the improvement of urban compactness (travels from home to job are reduced). Second, new heat and power stations can diversify their inputs by combining wood chips, methanol, ethanol, geothermal energy (eventually completed by fuel cells using hydrogen or photovoltaic modules on the roofs of buildings). Third, energy supply systems can be located the nearest possible of residents in order to avoid losses of transmission. A good example of this is the BedZed district built in Beddington, South London, where the objective of zero-emissions' houses has led to build innovating homes.

But ecodistricts must not only be conceived as ecological sanctuaries, and they should economically be self-sufficient. On the one hand, residents must be convinced that they invested money in a long-term investment for a reasonable cost (that could be lowered by using prefabricated system of construction like in the Millenium Village in London). On the other hand, economic activities must be available to allow people to work near from their home. That is why architects and planners propose to favour mixed-use areas rather than single-use districts.

Community wellness is obviously more difficult to measure, but this concept includes different ideas such as sense of community and common identity and not middle-classes' ghettos. Although the link between urbanism and social welfare is not clear (whether the existence of a community creates a successful area or whether a community is the product of a successful area), there are powerful evidences that demonstrate that a "sane" urban environment is a source of wellness for residents (Putnam, 1995). In short, well-designed districts would be an instrument to avoid environmental inequity (Bullard, 1990) and antisocial behaviours, favour mobilisations and create stable links between residents (Page, 1993).

THE INTERNATIONAL DIFFUSION OF THE ECODISTRICTS' LABEL

The success of ecodistricts as a new architectural brand mark for labelling urban quarters is also due to the intense process of diffusion undertaken by international organisations at the global level. Among them, the United Nations (UN) and the European Commission have been decisive actors to make increasingly popular the term ecodistricts. Such efforts allowed to establish a common framework (viz. sustainable development) and to give a relative unity to the different concepts related with urban sustainability (green architecture, eco-urbanism, eco-friendly materials, local democracy and so on). Such development heavily draws on the classical utopian ideas of town planning of the XIX century by suggesting that city and nature can mix without problems. By so doing, the "ecodistrict" label is also supposed to promote a certain type of town planning lying in civic virtue.

International incentives for urban sustainability

Without a doubt, the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (the “Earth Summit”) held in Rio de Janeiro was a crucial event for the future of the ecodistrict’s label. Such conference produced documents based on consensus and gave voice to many non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The Rio Summit re-formulated the definition of sustainable development imposed by the Brundtland Commission in 1987 by dividing it into different principles which have remained influential until today like the “public trust doctrine”, the “precautionary principle”, the “inter-generational equity principle”, the “intra-generational equity principle”, the “subsidiarity principle”, the “polluter-pays principle” and the “user-pays principle”.

Although it did not strictly focus on urban development *per se*, the Rio Declaration provided an essential instrument which synthesises these elements for sustainable communities planning: the Chapter 28 of the Agenda 21. The Rio Earth Summit’s participants adopted the Rio Action Plan during the conference – the so-called Agenda 21 –. Such document is composed by 40 chapters and includes a Chapter 28 which incentives government to create and implement Local Agenda 21. Chapter 28 of the Rio Action Plan contains four main objectives. Firstly, by 1993 cooperation between local authorities should be enhanced through a consultative process. Secondly, by 1994 representatives of cities’ association had to increase their co-ordination with the goal of exchanging experiences about sustainable development. Thirdly, by 1996 local authorities should have undertaken a consultative process with their populations to achieve a consensus on a Local Agenda 21 for their community. Lastly, local authorities should ensure the participation of women and youth in decision-making, planning and implementation process (Devuyst, 2001).

The Chapter 28 of the Agenda 21 was prepared and promoted by the ICLEI (International Council of Local Environmental Initiatives) created in 1990. The ICLEI worked in collaboration with the United Nations Environment Programme, the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA) and the European Commission. Despite the Local Agenda is soft law in the sense that it is regarded by national governments as highly interpretative this lobbying was efficient since by 1996, more than 1800 local agencies in 64 countries were involved in Local Agenda 21 activities (O’Riordan and Voisey, 1998; Lafferty and Meadowcroft, 2000).

Meanwhile, the urban aspects of sustainable development have converted into first order issues of the international agenda. As a consequence, many public and private organisations elaborated guides and empirical studies on this new fashionable topic. One of the most important was the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). Echoing the report *Environmental Policies for Cities* published in 1990 by the Group on Urban Affairs, a series of new projects emerged in 1993. The OECD Project on Energy Management’ group produced a handbook of good local practices based on a study of innovations at the municipal level (1995); the OECD also carried out a study on *Urban Travel and Sustainable Development* (1995), on *Housing, Social Integration and Liveable Environment in Cities* (1996) and on the *Ecological City through the Innovative Policies for Sustainable Development* report (1996).

Given this intense activity, the 1996 City Summit in Istanbul represented a logical step forward to specifically deal with urban development issues. The resulting Charter, known as the *Habitat Declaration*, avoided certain topics strongly shifted by powerful nations like the United States – including land-use and speculation taxes –, however, it also claimed changes in “unsustainable consumption and production patterns,

particularly in industrialised countries”, and called for “land-use patterns that minimise transport demands, save energy, and protect open and green spaces”.

But despite the silence of certain countries respect to these essential aspects of urban development, the United Nations maintained a critical discourse. The first issue of the United Nations Environment Programme, the so-called GEO-1 Global State of the Environment Report (1997) stated that despite intense efforts, the increase of world’s population and expanding economies in industrialising countries would generate more wastes, more energy consumption, more global warming, more conflicts related to resources and more inequality.

This declaration gave additional impetus to the Local Agenda 21 which included 6200 local agencies by 2002, when the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development was organised in Johannesburg, South Africa. The Summit invited to share best practices on local sustainable planning. The result was highly mixed but some agreements were established to tackle water and sanitation issues within the world’s cities (Lafferty, 2001, 63-84).

In parallel with this institutional commitment, the different networks of NGOs which are currently lobbying for increasing urban sustainability measures have won visibility at the global scale. The examples of the ICLEI, Oxfam, Doctors without Borders, the Worlds Social Forum and the Earth Charter Document developed in the 1990s for diffusing fundamental ethical principles underlying sustainability demonstrate global civil society have realised important efforts to counterbalance the inertia of *laissez-faire* promoted by some international agencies like the Global Trade Organisation.

European incentives for ecodistricts

Instead of a common and homogeneous policy on sustainable communities, the European Union only proposes a series of various measures related with cities and sustainable development to be implemented on a voluntary basis at different administrative levels.

The first Environmental Action Programme of the European Communities was decided during a Summit meeting in Paris in 1972 and launched in 1973 to reinforce environmental protection in all “technical planning and decision-making processes” at national and Community level (*Official Journal of the European Communities*, 1973, 6). Nevertheless, the Environmental Action Programmes are mere symbolical incentives produced by the Directorate General XI of the Commission to enhance the environmental quality of the European policies. As a soft law method, they cannot oblige member states to apply constraining measures. This was mainly due to the traditional positioning of environmental lobbyists in Brussels that usually pressed Euro-deputies and Commissioners in isolation from other policy sectors (Lenschow, 1999).

A significant step forward was given when the Single European Act was signed in 1986 – the same year Spain became an official member of the EU –. New legislative measures were adopted to establish an explicit legal basis for environmental policy and to “green” the non-environmental policies of the Community (Jordan, 2002b, 53-60; Haigh, 1998, 64-75). This last remark is fundamental as it forced all the European policies to integrate a long-term vision, so as to maintain sustainability of the implemented initiatives. This was particularly important for the policies of the pillar 1 (European Communities), above all the common agricultural policy, the structural funds and the cohesion fund, the pre-adhesion fund and the external co-operation policy since

in the past, some of these initiatives had produced negative outcomes for the environment (water polluting, modification of biotopes, etc.) (Coffey, 1998).

Thus far, the practical implementation of these principles of sustainable development has been unsatisfactory. The case of the European Regional Development Fund's policies demonstrates European structural funds only began to integrate sustainability measures from 1993 when lists of indicators, handbooks, questionnaires were developed to incentive local operators to propose sustainable projects to the Union. As a result, the whole structural policies (which affect European cities) integrated measures thought to enforce sustainability. While the first ones funded environmental issues in the form of "end-of-pipe technology" (the environmental elements were artificially added on to what were principally regional development projects), the current initiatives are obliged to integrate this dimension. This is the case of Community initiatives like Urban for instance which aimed to reactivate European cities through a set of ecological, economical and social measures.

For what regards the specific field of urban sustainability, the Council of Europe was the first European institution to stress the importance of cities in sustainable development issues by 1985. The same year, the European Charter of Local and Self-Government insisted on the right and freedoms of urban governments, as the closest level of government respect to citizen.

This does not mean the European Union has been inactive in this field. On the contrary, it has been a prime forum for developing continent-wide sustainability proposals from the 1990s as demonstrates the Green Paper on Urban Environment published in 1990 (European Commission, 1990). Actually, large part of the Chapter 28 of the Agenda 21 published by the United Nations was the product of the efforts of European pressure groups – including the own European Commission –. Indeed, in 1991 the European Council established the Expert Group on the European Environment. This group realised an intense work of knowledge diffusion and lobbying at different territorial levels through the *Sustainable Cities and Towns* campaign which integrated various actors like the ICLEI or the IULA. Meanwhile, a specialised group of the European Commission (1992) focused on the "Future of European Cities" and reached similar conclusions: a great effort should be done to improve the sustainability of European cities and towns while maintaining their inhabitants' quality-life through technological innovations.

Two years after, the Expert Group on the European Environment reached to catch the attention of world-wide cities by organising a fundamental event in Aalborg, Sweden: the *Sustainable Cities and Towns in Europe* conference (1994). The conference resulted in the so-called Aalborg Charter, a document outlining basic assumptions for improving sustainable development in European cities. The Charter proposed to local authorities to adopt the following strategy: 1. Recognition of the existing planning frameworks; 2. Identification of problems through extensive public consultation; 3. Prioritisation of tasks; 4. Assessment of strategic options; 5. Creation of a common vision of sustainable development; 6. Establishment of a long-term Local Agenda 21 with measurable targets; 7. Programming of the implementation (viz. timetable, responsibilities...); 8. Establishment of procedures for reporting on the plan implementation.

This adaptation of the Agenda 21 at the local level in Europe was successful since the network created around this event currently integrates 1000 local authorities representing 100 million people in 36 European countries. Moreover, the Charter was followed by a continuous effort of diffusion and deepening of good practices as

demonstrate the publication of *European Sustainable Cities* by the European Commission (1995).

Thanks to its relatively de-politicised position, the Council of Europe proposed in 2000 a document titled *Guiding Principles for Sustainable Spatial Development in the European Continent* where it tackled different issues like an efficient continent-wide transport system, the preservation of ecological and cultural landscapes and so on. Actually, these proposals were heard since the European Council adopted in 2001 the *European Union Sustainable Development Strategy* in Gothenburg (SDS 2001, renewed in 2006) for reducing Carbon Dioxid emissions and maintaining non-renewable resources.

Finally, even if embryonic, the European civil society has proven to be active in urban sustainability. The network formed by the Sustainable Cities and Towns work with the European Union since the 2000s to secure commitments on taxes and incentives for sustainable development, to adopt stricter targets for greenhouse gas emissions, and to plan a more sustainable transportation system.

THE RISE OF ECODISTRICTS IN SPAIN

But what has been the impact of this process in Spain? As such, eco-friendly urbanism is not completely new in Spain. For instance, many Spanish architects and planners from 1970s stressed the importance of building in accordance with nature and more than 8000 municipalities have already signed the Aalborg Charter (Echebarria, Ibarrutia and Aguado, 2004, 273-281). Actually, the number of urban projects referring to eco-label has considerably grown. Nevertheless, consistent evidences demonstrate that this diffusion was mainly oriented by short-term commercial interests.

Use and misuse of the ecodistrict's label:

Ecodistricts are not a European – or Occidental – specificity and many examples could be given in developing countries (for instance the Curitiba city in Brasil). Nevertheless, the Viikki district in Helsinki (Finland), the Ecolonia quarter in Alphen Den Rin (Belgium), the GWL-Project in Amsterdam (Netherlands), The Vauban district in Freiburg (Germany), The Kronsberg district in Hanover (Germany), the BedZed area in Beddington (United-Kingdom), the BO01 in Malmö (Sweden), the Vesterbro district in Copenhagen (Denmark) or the Hammarby Sjöstad quarter of Stockholm (Sweden) demonstrate that the most famous cases are located in northern European countries where local governments took very seriously the challenge of sustainability since the 1990s (Arene, 2005; Eco-Valle, 2005).

In Spain the adaptation process has been more complex. First of all, the majority of Spanish ecodistricts appeared in non-urbanised areas. At the difference of northern European countries, Spanish slums and industrial areas have not reached to catch the attention of public and private housing eco-promoters (with the notable exception of the Nou Barris in Barcelona). One of the reasons for explaining this phenomenon lies in the reduced willingness of municipal administrations to conceive specific eco-master plans, and then to attract possible buyers. Actually, until now, given the Spanish current housing regulation in Spain, the profits generated by the simple sale of municipal lands by the municipalities to private promoters largely went beyond the hypothetical gains of

the building of an eco-district by public administration. Actually, it seems that Spanish municipalities have done so with considerable assiduity...for better or worse.

For what regards the best practices in sustainable communities' issues, we identified some examples that demonstrate that a strong public investment and control on the process of building have been successful. Indeed, Valdespartares (Zaragoza) with 9,800 flats (only 230 houses) is supposed to be achieved in 2010. It is located in a former military land with special sun and wind orientation in order to create "microclimates" in private spaces. In the Barcelona's provinces, the Policity project of Cerdanyola del Vallés uses ecological heating and cooling. In San Sebastián, the Tetraner district's functioning lies in a multiplicity of energy sources. In Sarriguren (Pamplona), 5,027 flats make of this programme the most innovative Spanish eco-district. The Sarriguren quarter is located in a city with no more than 200,000 inhabitants; it is articulated around a traditional hamlet and built up with bioclimatic materials. In Madrid, the Ensanche de Vallecas concentrates the overwhelming amount of 26,046 houses, a district heating system feed by the burning waste and an "eco-boulevard" focused on social purposes. The Galindo programme in Barakaldo (Vizcaya) is one of the few projects including 2,200 houses and a large number of green spaces in a former industrial area; in the same way, Trinitat Nova in Barcelona has more than 3,300 flats in a context of mountain, highways and traditional slums. These are the best examples of Spanish "ecodistricts", and most of them are partially achieved (Del Caz Enjuto, 2009).

Nevertheless, as we stated in the title of this paper: "all that glitters is not gold" and the great majority of Spanish ecodistricts are clearly unsustainable. As states Pr. De Caz from the University of Castilla y León, we can identify three ideal-types of false ecodistricts. The first ones are those which lead expensive campaigns of marketing stressing that their buildings are surrounded by green spaces (for instance La Favera and Las Navas del Marqués in the province of Ávila, La Ciudad de la Ciencia y la Tecnología and Valdeprado Ciencia y Tecnología in Segovia...). Nevertheless, most of these green space use to be golf camps or leisure areas with swimming pools! This is particularly problematic in the arid areas of Spain where water crucially lacks.

The second ideal-type – much more elaborated – consists in selling an apparently "green" product to buyers. Those ecodistricts (Valdechivillas in Soria, Valdespartera in Saragossa, Villa Mediterránea in Almería, Santa María de Benquerencia in Toledo, Sociópolis in Valencia, etc.) use classical energy efficiency systems (solar batteries and good levels of insulation), intend to save natural resources (through the re-use of dirty water for irrigation for instance), and promote sustainable transport (through cycle lanes or the use of electric cars within the quarter). However, these ecodistricts share a severe handicap that makes them largely unsustainable. Actually, most of them are located at least at ten kilometres from the city centre. This means ecodistrict's inhabitants must use their personal car to reach their job everyday. The most surprising is this contradiction is perfectly assumed by some of them, like the Valdechivillas quarter where an "ecological" car-park of 46,000 places has been built.

Lastly, the great majority of Spanish ecodistricts are extremely extended (between 200 and 700 hectares) and most of them work as closed ghettos for middle-class by providing large flats for traditional families of five/six members. Obviously, this is not a rational consuming of land, a non-renewable good that could be used for different purposes like cultivation or the protection of endangered species.

The institutional dynamics of urban unsustainability in Spain

Indeed, despite some real cases of eco-neighbourhoods built in accordance with sustainability criteria, many cases using the term “ecodistricts” (and more generally the vocabulary of sustainability) are clearly unsustainable architectural projects which use this terminology as a mere commercial arguments for selling red-brick blocks. Arguing that the classical culturalist explanation in terms of Mediterranean syndrome cannot help to understand this process, we identified at least four institutional reasons which combined for explaining this situation of uncontrolled growth of the real estate sector: its high profitability, the easy access to bank loans, a fuzzy border between public and private sectors and a big opacity (Villoria Mendieta, 2001, 95-116).

The most important factor that can explain this shift towards urban sustainability is certainly the incredible profitability of the real estate sector in Spain from 1995 to 2008. Indeed, from 1997 to 2007 the profitability of the real estate sector in Spain has grown 175%. Such argument must be understood from a winner-winner perspective (at least at the short term) since the whole actors of the housing market won at a certain stage. To be sure, the conversion of rural lands into lands approved for development allowed land owners to multiply by 900% the price of their good (even when housing was for social purpose). Property developers were also sure to sell the future constructions before they achieved to build; in the same way potential owners preferred to buy houses in construction because of the high profitability of the real estate sector that made a house bought in 2000 can be sold two years before for the double of its initial cost. In these conditions, one of the arguments used by property developers to break free from their opponents was the use of the “green” terminology.

The second factor which favoured the “greening” of unsustainable projects in Spain was the financial attraction exerted by the real estate sector on all types of actors. Firstly, the rise of the building sector was motivated by the easy access to bank mortgage due to the deregulation of the financial sector in the late-1980’ and by the relatively low interest rates regulated by the European Central Bank which eased the access to house ownership. This rapid circulation of money combined with the arrival of poor migrants from Southern America, Eastern Europe and Northern Africa and the conversion of the Mediterranean coast into the second home for pensioners from Germany, United-Kingdom and Scandinavia. Secondly, the real state bubble provoked large firms invested in housing and offices in order to generate immediate profits. While the first ones were banks, insurance companies and hedge funds, some firms specialised in other sectors decided to invest in housing. This short term view dramatically feed the vicious cycle of speculation. Lastly, criminal organisations used the Spanish real state to launder money (basically from the Italian Camorra, the Russian mafia and the different Spanish criminal associations such as the *narcos* from Galicia). The green label added a plus of respectability to these projects. This does not mean the whole Spanish real state sector grown thanks to dirty money, but as states Pr. Diego Vera (2007), it helped considerably.

Thirdly, the misuse of the ecodistrict’s label cannot be understood without the co-operation of legal collaborators (like mayors and city councils) with private businessmen. Despite the advertisements of international agencies like the European Parliament through its representative Margrete Auken in 2009 or the United Nations and its special speaker Miloon Kothari in 2007 about the risk of overspecialisation of the Spanish economy in building trade (because of the progressive rupture between the

potential demand and a growing offer of real estate)⁴ the real estate sector was not regulated until now. Actually, the lack of a clear border between public and private regulation of lands made the market was the unique institution of regulation. The concession of planning permissions using fraudulently the term ecodistrict was not necessary illegal. Indeed, the Law 15/2001 on Land Use transferred great power on the use of lands to Spanish municipalities (which crucially lack resources since the 1980s and used the real state bubble to fund basic services and utilities). Though this competency of mayors has sometimes been used in a fraudulent way (for example by allowing to build in a protected natural area for money), it has been generally managed in a legal fashion. Nevertheless, the power of mayors to decide discretionally the future of municipal lands has gone too far as recognises the actual Law 8/2007 which transferred parts of these competencies to the regional level of administration. But at the end of the day, this evolution would not have been possible without the passivity of public authorities respect to unsustainable practices since most of them (mayors, judges...) acted slowly and inefficiently (or not at all).

The fourth element to explain this state is the lack of transparency. Although there is no legal criteria to label a building project with the ecodistrict brand mark, most of the actors of the real estate sector (including city councils, property developers, land owners, judges, notaries and simple citizens) retained information, hided the building plans or did not collaborate with the police. The access to information of NGOs and mass-media was a hard task until recent times, even when municipal and regional governments were the prime contractor. For example, the aborted project for building a Spanish “Las Vegas” in the desert of Las Bardenas in Aragon – planned by the socialist autonomous government – did not end because of the pressure of ecologist activists but because of the beginning of the financial crisis in 2008. This is the logical consequence of the lack of planning of urbanism in a country where such regulation was inexistent before the democratic process (1979-1982).

CONCLUSION:

As we shown, theoretically speaking ecodistricts have become a fashionable concept at the international level and has met a considerable success in Spain.

However, the initial intentions for “greening” the housing market in Spain seem to have ended in a deadlock. Then, while the number of urban eco-labels has considerably increased during last two decades (e.g. learning cities, digital cities, *villes éducatrices*, *villes numériques*, *energie-cités*, telecities, slow cities and so on), the building practices have generally remained the same and red-brick super-blocks continued to invade Spanish cities. The use of these labels was very simple: on the one hand, giving more legitimacy to political leaders and building companies through the use of “eco” concepts; on the other hand, selling old-fashion unsustainable buildings in a new “green” package to hypothetical buyers. In sum, looking back on the last decade we need to reject the majority of Spanish eco-districts for not respecting basic rule of urban

⁴ The fear of a dramatic break of the Spanish housing market was based on solid evidences. Actually, the parallel rise of the Euribor and the sudden lack of liquidity of Northern American banks (also due to the real state crisis in the United-States) stopped the flux of bank loans dedicated to housing. From 2008 it clearly appeared speculation had provoked in Spain the building of one million houses too many respect to the potential demand.

sustainability. In short, actors only used the label – but did not apply the *praxis* which corresponds to urban sustainability.

As we aimed to demonstrate, there is no Mediterranean syndrome which makes Spain unable to apply green solutions in urbanism, but a set of institutional variables which oriented Spanish economics towards speculation. Anyway, the rise of ecodistricts in Spain must be strongly nuanced. Obviously, such path dependency process is not a Spanish specificity, since many other areas entered in a spiral of speculation during the 1990s which dramatically ended in 2008. This may be the best moment to draw lessons from this situation. Indeed, it seems now obvious that a *laissez-faire* policy, short-term investments, local scarcity of financial resources and opacity are enemies of green urbanism. As state many Spanish mayors, the latter needs regulation, middle-term perspective, money and open processes of co-ordination (Pérez Monguió, 2006, 12).

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