

# HISTORIC CITIES AS SYMBOLIC SPACES IN SPAIN

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In the last thirty years historic centres that were considered as impoverished urban structures that ought to be replaced are now viewed as crucial enclaves of urban identity that ought to be protected. The singularity of the old city increases its importance in our global world. The value of the city as a living cultural legacy, with all its embedded symbolism, is thus recognised. We can find some problems within these spaces, as for example, depopulation and dwelling price increase with their consequences: degradation in some parts and revaluation in others, especially in those with progressive tertiarisation.

**Keywords:** historic centres, preindustrial city, old towns, globalization, symbolic spaces, spaces of memory, Spain.

## Introduction

The rising demand for space for new industrial and associated residential uses has generated large uncontrolled built-up areas, or the appearance of anonymous, repetitive urban fabric – the ‘no place’ that is more representative of developing countries, but which also occurs in many developed cities. Modern built-up areas, on the other hand, grow by themselves but lack the “intelligence” to organize their development (ROSI, 2004). To do so, the city would need to be organized, but this is not easy and, above all, is costly.

These conditions are based on the ephemeral, without taking into account later consequences, and do not value general interests beyond those which coincide circumstantially with the investor’s strategy. It is difficult to find a philosophy that is not so closely linked to town planning, which develops over time, seeks general aims and aspires to certain efficiency in resource management. Everything is overwhelmed by the speed of a global world. Globality revalues the importance of historical centres because each one is unique and singular in the global world.

We are going to explain the origin of the revaluation of historic cities, the importance of their historic centres based on their particular characteristics. This is the main point for their role as symbolic spaces. We will finish with the importance of town planning in historic cities, especially in their historical centres. In this way it is very important to preserve historical centres as an important element of sustainability in old historic cities.

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## **1. Historic cities**

A historic city is a place with buildings of patrimonial importance in the central part of the city. For these reason, they are now symbolic places.

Old towns in Spain, widely known as Historic Cities, with historic centres, constitute the most specific case in this debate. The idea of the city as a historical joint effort, a place of trade and exchange of ideas, a shared and symbolic space typical of Mediterranean culture (Maiques, 2003) cannot be reconciled with the most radical demands of some ultraliberal theorists who propose complete deregulation in the interests of economic efficiency. A kind of neutral urban framework is invoked, capable of receiving whatever may be required, without any special measures for protecting the environment. People talk of a “diffused city” which would be better defined as the ineffable “no place.” These ideas certainly have influential supporters. It could be that the market is more intelligent than some of its apparent representatives; this is the reason why the European Union backs urban societies arising from centuries of history, environmental balance, social cohesion and more flexible development strategies to absorb the precipitations of the global market. This backing is coherent with our history but, unfortunately, is rather courageous in view of the problems that our single currency raises (EUROPEAN COMMUNITY COMMISSION, 1996).

Every period is “historical,” but the concept which concerns us here deals with urban fabric prior to the appearance of urban expansion areas in the late 19th century. Their definition entailed the disappearance of the ancient limits of walled enclosures, easing the pressure produced by the intensive use of already existing, saturated urban structures. This situation was particularly noticeable in big cities: the old, spacious historical centres of Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia became progressively built up until the appearance of their urban expansion areas in the second half of the 19th century, which has made their regeneration especially difficult (large areas with over 200 inhabitants per hectare). Medium-sized cities usually have high density rates, but do not reach such levels and maintain a better relationship with the whole urban ensemble (Fernández, 2000). Hence, there has been a general disregard for Historic Urban Expansion Areas from the 19th century, which have a clearly different urban structure and may influence the alteration of pre-existing urban frameworks. The differences in accessibility, architectural trends, public space, etc. are accompanied by specific socio-economic factors which go beyond the consideration of Homogeneous Areas.

## **2. Historic centres**

During the last twenty years specific protection plans (Special Protection Plans) have been drawn up and are backed by both urban development laws and the Spanish Law of Historical Heritage (1985) (VV.AA, 2002). In the last ten years considerable economic aid, in many cases coming from different administrations, has been channelled to help restoration. The results obtained, however, have often fallen short of expectations. The problems of historic centres have proven to be especially complicated: the obvious physical and functional deterioration of their buildings is accompanied by an ageing

population with minimal purchasing power; the growing presence of ethnic minorities; the appearance of marginalized areas and loss of the traditional economic structure. These circumstances require rather more than mere policies of physical restoration.

Urban Regeneration is a wider-ranging strategy that is usually required in historic centres (Annioni, 1946); it entails the superposition of social integration programmes, economic dynamism, correcting deficiencies in services and creating new amenities. Considering its complexity, this process, naturally complementary to the restoration of the urban structure and buildings, usually requires the combined action of different administrations. There are points of reference in our country, effective to a greater or lesser extent, which could be established in the combination of Restoration Areas and the Urban Programmes of the European Union. These examples handle considerable resources, bring about clear improvements in the urban environment and revalue the land market, but do not always manage to re-balance the population through the recruitment of young married couples and other sectors of a socially established population. This leads us to ask ourselves whether we are working towards a sustainable historic centre (Navarreño, 2002, Ferrer, 2003).

The concept of an historic centre is sufficiently generic to warrant division into finer levels. In the study of History, periods are established according to representative facts in processes of historical transformation, known as Ages (González, 2005). Town Planning maintains obvious relationships with History, but when we talk of an historic centre, how far back does its history go? To the 19th century? Perhaps the 20th? Seville, for example has extended the limits of its historic centre in the traditional medieval part from 314.15 hectares to 783.5 hectares, thereby including urban development up until 1930. These are high quality urban structures of great interest protected by numerous Special Protection Plans, according to their homogeneity. It is a unique methodological plan, contrasting with the enormous difficulty that other cities face in approving special plans.

The experience of special plans in recent years has shaped a fairly generalised methodology in terms of analysing urban structures, building trends, protection criteria, proposals of intervention, even regulatory texts. Special planning has thereby assumed, in accordance with general reasoning, a habit of protection, minimizing other parameters that should be relevant to an understanding of the reality of historic centres (Ashworth, Tunbridge, 1999). It is therefore not surprising to discover that population analyses are usually imprecise; that those concerning housing – when they exist – are insignificant; that the ratio between public/private areas is unknown; data concerning the proportion of constructed area related to the surroundings, range of uses, etc; if existent, are usually out of date. In general, it is accepted without questioning that the space situation needs to be consolidated, but basic aspects which bear a direct relationship with sustainability such as density of inhabitants, types of housing, uses and building potential are unknown. The consequence tends to be an “a priori” commitment to situations of environmental quality which are unacceptable for many citizens, in terms of current quality of life criteria such as housing, possible amenities, lack of public space, accessibility for residents and other services (Healey, 2007). This adds up to difficulties in modernising an ageing population and attaining balanced pyramids; limiting the offer to very specific population sectors (the elderly, students, reduced family units, temporary residents etc., many historical cities house immigrants in their old buildings). Relatively small historic centres can, to a certain extent, cope with these

circumstances by compensating for shortages in their immediate surroundings or by having lower population densities, thus making their demands easier to fulfil.

### **3. The characteristics of historic centres**

Morphologically, they represent what is known in urbanistic terms as a space structure. If we consider constructive typology, a historic centre is a very rich diversified space. Different societies occupying them throughout history have left their mark, thus forming a varied ensemble. This sector still maintains certain heterogeneity in its use of land and the people occupying it: residential, business, industrial, administrative, financial, cultural, religious and entertainment functions. Although this functional vitality is decreasing, it is still sufficient to ensure a flow of all types of users who, together with the variety of residential social groups, form a rich mosaic in which the typically urban cosmopolitan experience has found its natural place.

Thus, the criterion of functionality may be a first base from which, taking into account relations with the town centre, a typology can be created. Different situations therefore exist:

- a) Historic centres that are no longer the centre on a financial and functional level but which are still symbolic and cultural centres (Cuenca, Cáceres, Saragossa, Barcelona, Oviedo).
- b) Historic centres where the historic and functional elements overlap on different levels, maintaining elements of centrality (Madrid, Valladolid, Segovia, León, Guadalajara, Salamanca, Ávila)
- c) Historic centres that are still the functional centre of the present city (Toledo, Santiago, Teruel, Plasencia)

Generally, the above features are characteristic of most historic centres, and differentiate them from the rest of the urban mosaic. However, another series of characteristics distinguishes them very clearly: those concerning problems and transformations in social, functional and morphological order that have been present for half a century (Table 1) demographic emptying, population ageing, tertiarisation of space, deterioration of the environment and the formation of problematic areas (González, 2005).

#### **Table 1. Typical problems in historic centres**

##### **Population and social structure**

Loss of population (demographic emptying)

Expulsion of social groups

Invasion-succession processes

Ageing

Segregation of areas and social exclusion (ethnic areas, problematic areas, stigmatisation of social and urban sectors)

Gentrification or creation of bourgeois communities (selective)

##### **Uses of the ground**

Scarcity of green areas

Lack of non-residential areas

Standard installations

Non-local metropolitan installations

Disappearance of residential usage and community services

Selective tertiarisation  
Loss of functional vitality  
Decrease in and disappearance of traditional sources of employment (shops, crafts, urban industry)  
Quantitative and qualitative transformation of commercial structure

### **Buildings and housing**

Lack of adjustment to new uses and familiar forms  
Obsolescence, ageing and degradation  
High number of empty dwellings  
Dwellings in ruins  
Replacement of residential buildings by modern office blocks and professional offices in selected areas  
Historic, cultural and typological determinants

### **Urban structure**

Insufficient and densely built-up urban fabric  
Shape and size of plots  
Variations in land price (absolute and relative increase)

### **Traffic**

Parking problems  
Congestion  
Pollution and noise pollution  
Difficult balance between the movement of pedestrians and traffic.

Source: Our own creation

### **a) Related to population and depopulation**

In many of them, the prevailing dynamic is abandonment or conversion into ghettos, depending on the city. In the first case, empty dwellings accumulate due to loss of inhabitants, and those who remain form an older insolvent group. For instance, one quarter of dwellings in León are empty because the number of registered inhabitants has dropped (applications for resident access cards decreased by 20% in 2005-06). The other consequence, especially in nuclei of a certain size or with historic sub-standard housing (tenements in Madrid, small apartments in Cádiz or Saragossa), is an increase in the number of inhabitants, with a significant percentage of immigrants occupying deteriorated housing (Tomé, 2007). The opposite phenomenon is that large urban operations and investment in infrastructure and equipment involved in the process of recovering historic centres activate the property market to the benefit of private investors, and a well-to-do, tertiarised space is created, with top of the range housing and, in particular, the expulsion of traditional residents (one example is Velluters in Valencia, or the Chinese quarter in Barcelona).

**Table 2.** Distribution of the population and housing inside the historic centre district of some cities in 2005

CITY	Inhabitants City (2005)	Area of historic centre (Ha.)	Number of Inhabitants	Inhab./Ha.	No Houses	Houses./Ha.	Inhab./Houses	No Building
MADRID	3155359	524	115432	220.29	80152	152.96	1.44	16854
BARCELONA	1593075	386	102546	265.66	43583	112.90	2.35	10895
VALENCIA	796549	173.16	18634	107.61	16854	97.33	1.10	4213
SARAGOSSA	647373	177.57	22568	127.09	17566	98.92	1.28	4391
SEVILLE	704154	783.5	82145	104.84	30120	38.44	2.72	7530
MÁLAGA	558287	154.4	16858	109.18	8254	56.45	2.04	2063
PALMA DE MALLORCA	325181	150	24800	165.33	8015	53.43	2.47	2003
CÓRDOBA	321164	233	29532	126.74	14524	62.33	2.03	3631
VIGO	293725	24.84	1982	79.79	2158	86.87	0.91	539
S. C. DE TENERIFE	221567	9.28	8651	932.21	4846	522.19	1.78	1211
CARTAGENA	203945	60	12833	213.88	4523	75.38	2.83	120
ALCALÁ DE HENARES	197.804	73.72	6163	83.6	3229	43.8	1.9	1005
ALMERÍA	181702	34.27	6524	190.37	2800	81.70	2.33	84
LEÓN	136414	53.08	8996	169.48	4102	77.27	2.19	1025
CÁDIZ	131813	140	42458	303.27	17000	121.43	2.49	121
LÉRIDA	124709	51.69	11380	220.14	5900	114.14	1.93	1019
PONTEVEDRA	79372	20	12472	623.60	4409	220.45	2.82	2616
GERONA	86672	45.12	5991	132.78	3520	78.01	1.70	1175
MANRESA	63929	45.53	5307	116.56	3445	75.66	1.54	786
HUESCA	45874	24.18	4080	168.73	1831	75.72	2.23	328
IBIZA	34779	26	2933	112.81	2272	87.38	1.29	403
OLOT	31271	4.7	1108	235.74	698	148.51	1.58	174
LA ALCUDIA	15897	17.05	4186	245.51	1486	87.15	2.81	371
ALLARIZ	5351	28.9	812	28.09	532	18.40	1.52	133

Sources: INE (National Survey Institute) and official city hall Websites. (Our own creation) (area expressed in hectares: ha)

As a consequence of their environmental deficiencies and problems of accessibility, the population of historic centres has, in general, fallen during the last thirty years. The larger the city, the greater the drop in population: – Madrid from 300,000 to 136,125; Barcelona from 173,638 to 82, 829 and Valencia from 56,391 to 27, 010. (Tabakman, 2001). This process has not caused the tertiary sector to become generalised, something which occurred in certain specific zones; rather there has been a massive “exodus” of the traditional population when faced with the shortcomings of the historic centre’s environment and attracted to other areas that meet their requirements. The drop in numbers may, however, be less than official statistics show due to the existence of inhabitants who are unlikely to be registered, as is the case of the immigrant population (González, 2006).

We may note that the largest densities of housing/ha. and inhab/ha usually occur in large cities whose historic centres have had periods of intensive occupation. Historic centres whose urban framework is of Arab origin (Cartagena, Seville) stand out for their low density (60 houses/ha) as the average is around - or even exceeds - 100 houses/ha (Table 2).

Evidence suggests that increasing population densities to the equivalent of boom period levels could cause already-straining urban structures to collapse – excessive density would be unsustainable. This problem can be generalized to the urban structures of cities which underwent intensive use of their historic centres (as a result of industrial development) before the appearance of Urban Expansion Areas. On the other hand, this would be a good opportunity to correct the imbalances brought about by the pressure of speculation associated with the afore-mentioned periods, by recovering the true historic dimension of the primitive structure, which was much more sustainable in the environment in which it was created.

Contrary to the developed areas of the European Union, the problem of sustainability does not arise from the pressures of usage and demography on the land, but the opposite: an absence of population to guarantee its sustainability (Cherp et al., 2004; Jordan, 2008). In general, if the existing empty buildings in historic centres were to be used, the population in small cities would increase by 25%. To achieve this, attractive strategies for a balanced population would have to be drawn up, starting with systematic intervention (by means of Restoration Areas) to recover housing and the redevelopment and reclassification of public areas. These should be simultaneously complemented with programmes of social integration, regeneration of economic fabric and a balance in resources, similar to the URBAN and RE-URBAN actions that have taken place, for example, in León (González, 2006).

#### b) Related to housing prices

The continuous rise in housing prices since the nineties has not helped to increase the population in the historic centres. It is true that since 2007 these prices have fallen (Table 3), but not everywhere. Some central places have maintained their high prices, especially the more exclusive ones in large cities, such as the borough of Salamanca in Madrid or the Diagonal in Barcelona, which are the only boroughs to have risen in price during 2008, costing over 5000 €/m<sup>2</sup>. We can see the examples of medium sized towns: Alcalá de Henares and León; and three examples of the main cities in Spain: Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia. Housing prices fell by more than 3% in all of them.

**Table 3. Housing prices in the historic centre district of some cities**

Size town / City	Historic centre/ Town or city	2001	2004	2007	2008	Variation 2007-2008 (%)	Source
<b>Medium Alcalá de Henares</b>	Historical centre	1473	2778	3506	3382	-3,51	Real estate webpage
	Average town	1196	2414	2921	2577	-11,78	Real estate webpage
	Average town	1319 (*)	2341	2847	2467	-13,35	Idealista
<b>Medium León</b>	Historical centre	1501	2194	2031	1739	-14,39	Real estate webpage
	Average town	1265	1749	2200	1847	-16,05	Real estate webpage
	Average town			1943	1965	1,13	Idealista

<b>Large Madrid</b>	Historical centre	2305	3870	4728	4376	-7,45	Idealista
	Average town	2334	3787	4262	4044	-5,11	Idealista
<b>Large Barcelona</b>	Historical centre	2011	3607	4613	4077	-11,62	Idealista
	Average town	2185	3905	4769	4361	-8,56	Idealista
<b>Large Valencia</b>	Historical centre			3664	3422	-6,60	Idealista
	Average town			2849	2668	-6,35	Idealista

(\*) First trimester 2002

We can see that housing prices in the historic centres exceed the mean prices in a city, especially in those whose historic centres have been cared for and are well preserved, as in the case of Alcalá de Henares, Madrid and Valencia, which have been revalued in comparison with the city average. In other cities this revaluation of the historic centres is not observed, perhaps due to the great weight of deteriorated ancient buildings, usually occupied by ageing or immigrant populations. This means that the prices of these dwellings are lower than the mean prices in the city, as happens in León or Barcelona with historic centre prices slightly lower than the average for the city. This process seems to be on the increase in some cases when there is no investment in improving historic centres.

Price revaluation in the historic boroughs is tied to the significance of rehabilitation, renovation or new construction processes, as is occurring in Alcalá de Henares, for example. This explains a much higher mean price in the historic area than that in the whole town. These processes, although to a lesser extent in other cities, produce a growth in one-person households and rejuvenation (gentrification) of the population residing in the historical centre (Salet, 2008).

We can conclude by pointing out that the increased housing prices in historical centres has been continuous over the last few years, in some cases more noticeable than in others. Land prices are always higher in the historic part of the city. It is possible to state that the general trend in historical centres is to always have higher prices per square meter in relation to the average town. And the growth of the city reinforces centralism, which generates new uses of the land in central areas, such as for commercial purposes, resulting in competition for these locations and increasing the price of the land (González, Lázaro, 2006).

#### 4. Historical centres as symbolic spaces

Jean Beaudrillard (1993) perceived the common role of the majority of information systems, especially cinema and computers, as their ability to create 'simulacrum' or copies, imitations, reconstructions of events, things, people, institutions, etc. In the perception of the global city, citizens know their urban environment but receive

multiple references and simulacrum from other cultural environments via different information channels. Thus, the culture which projects the most images or copies of itself becomes dominant when compared with others, which are less active but more coherent with the environment from which they stem (Hamedinger et al, 2008)

The simulacrum itself has no desire to be long-lasting, its attraction is based on its capacity to change contents, but its applications generate concrete results – habits, forms, urban structures etc. – that unfold in specific surroundings. These displays do not follow criteria of permanence, nor of environmental coherence. They are simply offered as products for consumption that, once their cycle is completed, will be replaced by new elements that were previously simulated by the techno market, as a new trend. The problem is that we are talking of a very unique market: the city. A city is composed of multiple dimensions and agents, each equally important, and whose historical roles should not be forgotten (Salet, 2008).

The city becomes another consumer product and intensifies the process of demand on natural resources; sustainability once again becomes a point of conflict for urban action (Bertinelli, Strobl, 2007). Private promotion, always sensitive to market demands, has thrown itself into this type of action in new urban developments, with the consent of administrations that interpreted low density as a synonym of advanced urban quality (Low, 1999). Certain geographical areas determine the *urban identity* of their inhabitants (Lalli, 1988), and a large percentage are identified with the historic centres of cities.

Urban symbolism has a double dimension:

- **Personal:** on an individual level. A characteristic inherent to the individual's perception, representation or interpretation of space. Its significance is orientated towards a political-ideological or institutional expression.
  - Examples of studies: by Lynch (1990) on the environmental model built from three elements: identity, structure and meaning.
- **Social,** space shared by different individuals, groups, shared symbolism (family, group, community etc.). Meaning is decided by the community.
  - The perception of spatial meaning as a social process (Tuang, 1997)

A symbolic urban space will be that element of a determined urban structure, understood as a social category which identifies a specific group associated with this environment, capable of symbolizing one or some of the relevant dimensions of this category, and which allows individuals within the group to perceive themselves as equal both when identifying with that space and also different from other groups on the basis of the space itself or the dimensions or categories it symbolizes (Valera, 1997). A symbolic urban space must give people a clear, specific, well-structured environmental image and, at the same time, it must hold a symbolic meaning with a content relevant to the urban community involved, be clearly defined and count on a degree of symbolic richness or complexity which allows the different social groups in the community to perceive themselves as equal on the basis of a determined urban social category.

The meanings of a determined symbolic space can have a double reference source, in general lines. In the first place the symbolic load can be dictated or determined by dominant powers, so the meaning is orientated towards a political-ideological or

institutional reference. Secondly, the symbolic meaning of a determined space can be socially defined by the community itself, this being the result of a social construction which operates among the individual people making up the community or using this space or related to it. This double distinction as regards the source of the origin of the symbolic meaning led Pol to differentiate between symbolic spaces "a priori" and "a posteriori" (Valera, Pol, 1994). Although the configuration of a space with an "a priori" symbolic load is determined by the political and ideological characteristics of the dominant powers, social and spatial historic evolution, characteristics and forms of organization and social structuring of the community and the type of relations established with the space are determining factors for configuring a symbolic space "a posteriori". The distinction made by Lefebvre between unifunctional, multifunctional and transfunctional spaces – the last having a symbolic meaning- (Lefebvre, 1991), the consideration of spatial symbolism as an ecological variable by Theodorson (1947) or the relevance that certain environments can have in configuring the spatial identity of *place identity* (Tuang, 1997) can also be taken into account from this point of view.

## 5. Conclusions

Our cities undergo general processes: they expand by means of suburbs and do not achieve satisfactory results in the recuperation of their historic centres. The new buildings are often incongruous with their surroundings, arising from a combination of popular demand (modelling the "simulacrum") and the decisions of the administrations which permit physical and partial restoration of state inheritance. This is not a promising path within a philosophy of sustainability. In the Spanish community, the situation is more pronounced because our historic centres are depositories of important cultural inheritance and are crucial to the urban structure, but they can reach a situation of "assumed obsolescence": "Historic centres, as we all know, are beautiful, we love them... but only people of a certain age are willing to live in them – because they have always done so – students and immigrants." In addition, urban symbolism must be taken into consideration when planning and regenerating their historic centres.

"Tradition is the law of progression. A progressive design does not destroy what has been before, but rather places it in a new dimension." Borek Sipek's statement should be adopted in order to confront the problem of the Historic City: new dimensions must be found for it, as has happened throughout its existence. Citizens must be re-educated in the face of certain urban life styles, they must be shown the distinct criteria of sustainability that different options of urban lifestyles imply. The city should be recovered as a place for coexistence by creating models of urban solidarity. Historic centres should guarantee quality of life in their homes and public places, extending these selectively when necessary. Experiences with the introduction of pedestrian areas have been positive, but vehicular access must be guaranteed, at least for residents and services, establishing priorities for networks, timetables and traffic. Extreme solutions that consider automobiles as outlaws must be avoided in spite of their theoretically negative presence.

The pledge of our cities should be to

- focus on criteria of urban solidarity that restrict suburban developments with high environmental costs

- reinvest the benefits of these developments in a commitment to active intervention in the historic centres by means of land policies, housing and social programmes and the recovery of their economic fabric.

Sustainability should be a basic objective, reducing the impact of our historic centres (including their Urban Expansion Areas) on the environment and on energy. Variety of usage should be encouraged as well as valuing the importance of public space and guaranteeing the quality of life of the population in accordance with current criteria. By doing so we could then bring back their integral and multidimensional character, proposed by the URBAN and RE-URBAN programmes, for our town planning.

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