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The disposal of military sites in Spain today: challenges and limitations towards a sustainable urban development

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Abstract: The redevelopment of military land in Spain has been poorly analyzed, although it has triggered relevant transformations in cities across the country. This research aims to partially fill this gap by comparing two recent redevelopment processes occurring in Madrid and Valladolid based on four factors underlined by experts in the field. While few academics have dealt with these dynamics until today, the work carried out can be a pivotal basis on which ground the analysis can be extended case by case at state level, also for a comparison with other countries.

Keywords: urban entrepreneurialism; public-owned land; privatization; profit-driven approach; land-use planning

1. Introduction

This research proposes a critical reflection on the disposal processes affecting the Spanish military real estate assets to understand their limitations and opportunities in triggering sustainable urban development. Although emerging international research on the Ministry of Defense (MoD) sites has growingly expanded in European countries such as France, Germany, and Italy, the Spanish case appears understudied [1]. The basic hypothesis is that military real-estate assets, whether protected as official heritage or not, are usually managed as a sort of “capital in land” strictly linked to neoliberal real estate development patterns. The reason for this circumstance lies in the focus of the disposal policies, which searched for immediate high revenues for the central government and the military. The aim of this research is thus to identify the repercussions of the tendency to privatize public land on the ground of neoliberal approaches to public policy and urban governance, which privilege markets, empower self-interested economic actors, and reduce the public good to an aggregation of private interests.

2. Area of study

The case study analysis regards the inquiry on two redevelopment processes triggered by PREPIDEF, the Spanish-led proposals for closure of military facilities in 2013 [2]. The case studies (Table 1) are the Precision Artillery Workshop (*Taller de Precisión de Artillería*, TPA; Figure 1) in Madrid and the La Rubia barracks (*Cuarteles de la Maestranza de Artillería*; Figure 2) in Valladolid. Both are located in urban sectors, chosen for their different characteristics in terms of size (small and relevant), location (urban center and periphery), and social composition (wealthy and popular neighborhood). The data shown in Table 1 comprise the main characteristics of the case studies. It is the basis to understand the most important aspects of the redevelopment process.

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Table 1. Main characteristics of the two barracks. Source: elaboration by the Authors (2023).

Military asset	Case studies	
	Precision Artillery Workshop	La Rubia barracks
Plot size	14,569 sqm	107.880,65 sqm
Built-up area	16,520 sqm	42.434 sqm
Building	1899–1915	1930–1945
Underuse	2013–2015	2011–2015
Abandonment	2015–2020	From 2015
Current state	Redeveloped (2022)	Abandoned
Current buildability	54,225 sqm	64,119.53 sqm
Floor Area Ratio	3.72 sqm/sqm	0.60 sqm/sqm
Per capita income by census tract	21,456 €	15,212 €
Average selling price (district)	5,785 €/sqm	1,580 €/sqm
Average rental price (district)	18 €/sqm	8€/sqm



(a)



(b)

Figure 1. (a) Redevelopment works (b) The residential building replacing the TPA. Source: Authors (2019; 2023)



(a)



(b)

Figure 2. (a) A blocked access into the barracks. (b) La Rubia barracks’ external walls. Source: Authors (2022)

3. Methodology

The research was carried out through specific desk research, archival work, and fieldwork in Madrid and Valladolid, interviews with the Ministry of Defense and the local municipalities spokespersons, as well as the collection of primary and secondary sources

(urban planning documents, land registry, consultation of real estate market data and statistics from the National Institute of Statistics, press reviews, etc.).

The case studies analysis consists of a comparative scheme based on four key factors that help to identify the incidence of the redevelopment of the barracks in the urban contexts in which they occur [3-5]. First, the lucrative and desirable location in the real estate market. Second, the conflicts between the stakeholders involved (i.e. MoD, City Council, and other public and/or private actors). Third, the definition of the costs of the project for the municipal coffers and/or derived from its environmental rehabilitation. Eventually, the evolution of the disposal and redevelopment process, including the management of the built heritage with well-defined stages, agreed with the interested parties and framed in the context of the real estate market.

4. Results

4.1. Real estate market situation

The location factor plays a fundamental role in triggering the redevelopment. The more economic benefits that can be obtained from the new uses, the greater the tendency to carry out a real estate operation, usually residential. The Madrid case presents a smaller size and, therefore, a smaller initial investment, which can make the final product more attractive, especially in times of economic uncertainty such as the present. In Valladolid, although the average selling and rental price at the district level is lower, the redevelopment would require a higher investment. The floor area ratio is also lower than in the case of Madrid, but the greater the future buildability, the greater the economic performance in the current real estate dynamics.

4.2. Conflicts

In Madrid, associations at the district and neighborhood levels filed several administrative appeals against the redevelopment process to prevent the demolition of the TPA. These appeals were based on multiple reasons. First, none of the housing units were earmarked for social housing; second, the need to include the partial monetization of the obligatory transfers; third, the deficit of green areas and facilities at the district level would increase after the redevelopment; end, eventually, the sector allocated for green areas and wooded open spaces did not meet the necessary conditions to be used for this purpose.

The case of Valladolid is characterized by a change of opinion on the part of the military regarding the future of the old barracks and by a unilateral decision by the City Council to assign a new classification to the military land, without any process of public participation with the residents of the La Rubia neighborhood. This plan, initially rejected by the Ministry of Defense in May 2019, was finally accepted in June 2020 and established a medium-term scenario of 8 years to approve a detailed plan, i.e. 2028.

4.3. Definition of cost

In Madrid, the costs include the monetization of part of the concessions made for creating a residential building. In addition, given the lack of material surface within the plot for the allocation of public equipment and services, the Partial Plan for Internal Reform (a Spanish detailed plan named "*Plan Parcial de Reforma Interior*") proposed monetizing part of the transfer of local public networks (10,772.5 sqm out of 16,267.50 sqm obliged by law according to the buildability of the area).

In the case of Valladolid, the MoD has still not provided a detailed analysis of the current state of the buildings inside the enclosure of the La Rubia Barracks, with unclear indications regarding the presence of pollution, environmental hazards, and the definition of rehabilitation costs. Moreover, the lack of a study on the potential presence of buildings worthy of protection seems linked to their poor condition as they are in urgent need of extensive rehabilitation if they are not to be demolished.

4.4. Temporal evolution

In 2016, the Madrid City Council authorized the demolition of the TPA, which took place in 2019, but the Contentious Administrative Court partially upheld two appeals and annulled the detailed plan when the new housing was already under construction. The City Council appealed this decision, but in February 2021, the Supreme Court definitively annulled the plan that had allowed the construction of 450 luxury apartments on top of the old Neo-Mudejar building.

In the case of La Rubia, no clear temporary program was defined due to the speculative activity of the MoD, whose strategy was to keep a land already useless for defense purposes, hoping that the City Council would approve a change of use as lucrative as possible concerning the conditions of the real estate market, to maximize profits.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This work can be considered as a first approximation to the knowledge of the general dynamics affecting the redevelopment processes of abandoned military land in Spanish cities. The identification of four key factors led to a better understanding of the redevelopment process and helped to identify the main issues that can be found in other cases. In this sense, the case study analysis shows two different ways of dealing with the redevelopment process in which, a priori, the size of the city may not have an impact, but the size of the land to be transformed does.

The research reveals the tendency to inappropriately manage the redevelopment of many military assets to dispose of, which eventually led to the decommissioning, dismantling, deconstruction and then effective eras from the urban landscape. Among others, two factors stand out. First, the disposal policy of military land has followed the general trend of neoliberal restructuring of public institutions. In the face of government cutbacks in defense, the MoD is likely to sell the land it owns on the real estate market as a recurring measure in the austerity toolbox. Second, old military sites are large consumers of public land, so they can support relevant public-led urban regeneration processes of deprived neighborhoods and long-term local prosperity and well-being. However, despite their status as public assets, the need to generate much-needed revenue inhibits former military assets from becoming social anchors and providers.

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