
IN A VILLAGE OF CASTILLA... DEALING WITH HERITAGE CONSERVATION IN A DEPOPULATION CONTEXT

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The existence of small Historic Urban Areas with a recognized heritage value but a very limited capacity of intervention, it is quite frequent in Europe.

The lack of demographic and economic dynamism -both the town itself and the territory where it is placed-, requires renewing the intervention criteria. About building conservation, monumental and not, it is needed an integrative vision of the heritage, the territory and the urban fact. It is not a new approach, but nowadays it acquires a special significance, because of the current economic context, the specific circumstances of these cases and international trends in the urban heritage field as the concept of Historic Urban Landscape. Communication reviews this situation in the region of *Castilla y León* (Spain), where an important amount of their historical towns reflects these features even unable to develop compulsory planning instruments. Pointing the need to generate new intervention strategies, they should consider the town and the territorial heritage, developing cooperative strategies and the adaptation of traditional mechanisms of protection to the characteristics and needs of this kind of realities.

The conservation of built heritage is a complex issue with a long history of academic and professional works, which over the years have expanded the points of view, always depending on the diffuse nature of the elements in consideration and the multiple criteria with which we can cope with this task. Nowadays, we can consider that, at least theoretically, we have surpassed the vision focused exclusively on the technical issues of the intervention on the buildings, and also about the limits that can be achieved by adapting them to new uses that in many cases do not coincide with those for which they were conceived.

This way, concepts characterizing the relationship between the building or space of the intervention and its context has been developed some time ago. Those complex concepts are difficult to define and materialize, and they are subjected to constant interpretation and discussion. For example, this is the case of the environment (in the sense of the immediately adjacent space to the monument, understood as a protection mechanism), or the *ambiance*, from Gustavo Giovannoni's formulation in *Vecchie città ed edilizia nuova*, which considers the built context as an essential element for the interpretation of the monument, to the point of talking about "*monumento-ambiente*" (G. Giovannoni, 1931, p. 26).

In addition, it also has gone beyond this purely formal and visual view, in order to try to include the indissoluble relationship between the built and the people who live in and use it. Already in the 1950s Giovanni Astengo proposed, in the Plan of Assisi, both the need

to consider the city as a whole and also the living conditions of the population, which is, ultimately, the main subject of the intervention.

Not only does not make sense to isolate in time and space a building or a portion of the city of their material and social environment, but it also has no future unless the sole purpose is to turn it into a simple piece of museum.

Today, after the approval of the *Recommendation on Historic Urban Landscape* by the General Conference of UNESCO on 10th November 2011, the approach to urban heritage from the concept of landscape, through the so-called “historic urban landscape” begins to develop, but not with large gaps and deficiencies (J.L. Lalana Soto, 2011 and 2013). We will leave aside the doubts about the practical application of this approach, mainly due to the circumstances of his birth, from the *Vienna Memorandum* (2005), with a clear visual and formal drift. We will also avoid commenting the complexity and poor general knowledge about the concept of landscape implications, aggravated by the absence, at least until now, of a guide for the implementation and interpretation of this “new approach”. However, what we want to note here is its relevance when studying the urban heritage, based on the essential characteristics of the landscape concept: its holistic character, integrating different and diverse aspects and scales that we perceive in an integrated way (nature, society, past, present, shape, values...), and therefore the importance of the relationships between these elements above the elements themselves, and the temporal dimension, which emphasizes the process. All this, emphasizes the idea of a living ensemble subject to evolution and change. A multidimensional change, which in some cases may constitute the essential support of the heritage value, and in other ones it appears as a problem, but both to be assumed as a fact. Even though each case has its own rhythm, its logic, its inertia and resistance or adaptive capacity (what has become known as resilience), and once again raises the big question of what already Giovannoni had referred to as “the acceptable limits” of change.

Therefore, understanding the processes and relationships between the various elements involved in a heritage area, is an aspect of great importance, especially when it is the case of a territorial context of weak demographic, social and economic dynamism. This is a still little studied case, as evidenced by the absence of international references beyond the *Charter of Bruges* (ICOMOS, 1975) or the *Declaration of Taormina* (EUROPA NOSTRA, 2009) dealing with this issue only tangentially, despite being a case relatively common, at least in some regions of Europe.

Castilla y León (Spain) is, with 95000 km², one of the largest regions of the European Union, and also one of the least populated, with two and a half million inhabitants according to the latest official data (National Institute of Statistics, 2013), with a population density of just over 26 inhabitants / km². But the characteristic point is that most of this population is concentrated in urban areas, so almost two thirds of the municipalities have less than 100 inhabitants.

As a result of the historical process of the region, in relation to its past historical importance, with an economy based on agriculture and its corresponding settlement structure, there are remarkable examples of architecture, both popular and monumental, and interesting urban areas, with 114 urban historic areas declared of cultural interest. The conservation of those historic areas with a non-excessive modification was possible in most of the cases because of the effects of migration processes themselves, and especially the so-called “rural exodus”, explained, among others, by the change of the economic base of Spanish (and

European) society. In order to appreciate the result of this migration processes, it has to be known that it took place in many different territorial scales, and with a complex sequence of nature (internal or external, permanent or temporary, short or long distance ones...), intensity, type of population involved and diverse origin and destination of migration. All those factors have led to a variety of conditions, where one of the main manifestations is the preservation of valuable historical groups of buildings which were separated from the speculative urban renewal processes of the past decades, located today in a rural aged area and intensely characterized, in general, by low economic and social dynamism. On the other hand, the speculative process has focused on the recipient areas of this emigration, the cities and main urban areas.

Urban and territorially, we believe that the study of historic areas should be characterized in relation to their urban dynamics, uses, functions, population and territorial situation, something that we began to explain a few years ago (J.L. Lalana Soto & V. Pérez-Eguíluz, 2011), and something we have been working at various scales for the next years.

Facing the development of intervention strategies as possibilities and alternatives of urban heritage conservation in *Castilla y León*, we start from the idea of establishing the way in which this is conditioned primarily by the internal dynamics of urban development, typical of an urban area, or by the territorial ones. We consider it an essential distinction, because at the moment that increases the socioeconomic and demographic dynamism, the interests and actors involved are multiplied, the analysis becomes more complex, but on the other hand, it increases the chances of intervention. If we do not do that, the rest of alternatives are weaker and more dependent on another scale of intervention and planning (the territorial one). Thus, one might distinguish between those areas where the scale of the city dominates the main alternatives, where the instruments are based on urban planning, which belong to the scale that focuses almost all of the debates and reflections on the urban heritage and the mechanisms of intervention on it; and the other areas, where the territorial view predominates, and the instruments of regeneration and strategies must also be a territorial one.

At least in the case of *Castilla y León*, and probably in other areas, we could find a third type of areas, those which are involved in the two explained logics, the urban and the territorial ones, especially because they have acted as service centers to their immediate surroundings, and they can be affected by both the urban development pressure at certain times and the effects of population clearing in others. Those are more complex cases, which have to do to some other factors (as an not exhaustive enumeration are: laws, range or territorial level, territorial structure of settlement, structure and population dynamics, accessibility, distance to the urban centers of reference, image, etc.), so they need to develop a methodology in order to establish relationships between them and to characterize the issues involved, and therefore, the challenges they faced and the intervention mechanisms. Anyway, the existing planning instruments for the urban heritage protection have not taken into account this distinction, extending the same criteria to very different situations, taking the risk that the same conservation policy may end up becoming an added problem (J.L. Lalana Soto & V. Pérez-Eguíluz, 2014). Usual strategies of intervention on historical areas, inspired on urban context settings and applied indiscriminately, they have been based primarily on the catalogue of buildings (in the best cases with an exclusive morphological criteria), and they have focused on regulating physical interventions on existent and new buildings, rather than seeking reuse alternatives facing a more efficient preservation (both

in what refers to the building as to the population).

One of the results we have observed through the research project called *Políticas urbanas aplicadas a los conjuntos históricos* (directed by Alfonso Alvarez Mora) has been that, even though these measures have been particularly focused on the building conditions and in many cases with an important loss of population, housing production has continued during the years of the housing boom (mainly secondary residences), but this production has done nothing but statistically masking a deterioration in real conditions of general buildings of historic areas. In both cases we include in this paper (*Grajal de Campos*, in the province of *León*, and *Castrojeriz* in the province of *Burgos*), when analyzing the built conditions of the residential plots within the historic area declared of Cultural Interest, we have counted 15% of residential plots with no habitable dwelling, and between 15 and 20% of empty plots.

Many of these small municipalities are not able to develop the town planning regulations, much less heritage protection schemes or instruments, so we must consider if the usual criteria are not the most appropriate in cases in which the territorial dependency manifests so clearly, and if it is not necessary to reformulate the scales and methods of intervention, beyond the municipal limits and looking for possible alternatives to the essential problem, depopulation.

From the European Union, the mitigation of these imbalances between rural and urban areas has also been a priority, where the heritage aspects are nothing more than a part. Even so, today we can say that the Leader programs, combined with the activities of local action groups and the initiatives of regional administrations have not reached these goals, and in certain rural areas, even the provision of local basic services is a problem to solve. On the other hand, the existence and the value of this heritage require applying some protection criteria, which should not be present ones, at least in the way they have been implemented, often because protective measures becomes another obstacle to the normal developing of life. Saying that we refer to the way they use to turn into hardly approachable planning requirements, legislative failures that i.e. impede the application of grants for rehabilitation or complicated authorization procedures of works delaying even seemingly basic conservation operations. The inability to undertake and manage the development of these instruments (nowadays a municipal competency), it eventually impede the normal development of life in the built historic area, endangering the self-preservation.

From our point of view, we believe that awareness of this problem already is a significant and necessary step. It is also important to open new channels for reflection, information and visibility, enabling the knowledge exchange at all levels (disciplines, institutions, agents...). In this sense, as one of the ways of working, the *Instituto Universitario de Urbanística* from University of Valladolid, where we belong, traditionally involved in the study and planning of historic areas, it has signed an agreement with the *Instituto de Historia* (University of León), the municipality of Grajal de Campos and a group of companies and professionals to publish and to make visible this reading of the situation of the urban heritage linked to villages affected by this process of depopulation. It is not only to educate the population, which has been the usual line of work in these cases, but also going straight onto a specific and real case, bringing this awareness to institutions, professionals from various fields and students. Talking about this educational goal which involves our students, we have the double objective of perceiving the challenge since its formation period and the development of an interdisciplinary vision. For this specific point

we are applying an Educational Innovation Project, in the school of architecture of the University of Valladolid, mixing the historical, geographic and planning vision.

In addition, the heritage values can be part of the intervention strategies playing the role of a dynamism factor, combining protection with revitalization. Notwithstanding, these strategies, according to the limited amount of opportunities, must be based on a wide and flexible view, bringing into agreement the responsible exploitation of natural resources, the implementation of productive activities and the dissemination of cultural content, In short, answering to a clear formulation of the ultimate objectives we pursue.

The application of generic instruments for intervention and protection disconnected from reality, and the generalization of criteria and requirements can be ineffective and even counterproductive when it affects a socio-economic and territorial structure or weakened population. Therefore, all measures established in these cases must take place within a global and regional context, inextricably linking building and population. Otherwise, we run the risk of encountering us with values and assets that will disappear with its inhabitants.

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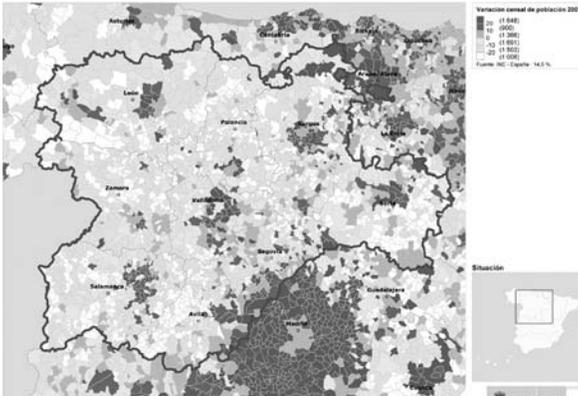


Fig. 1 - Population variation by municipalities 2001-2011



Fig. 2 - Historic Towns with by municipal population. From high to low intensity distinguish over 30,000, intermediate and less than 5,000 inhabitants. Source: Authors, from National Statistic Institute data.

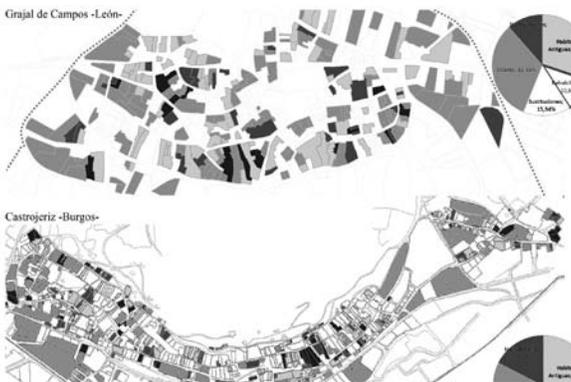


Fig. 3 - Residential building state in Grajal de Campos (León) y Castrojeriz (Burgos).