
Urban Structure and Public Space

Study and Designing Experimentation for Framing Urban Peripheries. Valladolid

EURAU'12

ABSTRACT. Public space is the thread of a methodological discourse about urban structure, interpreted from three complementary systems. We read urban structure as "support" of urban life. The three-systems (roads and mobility, centers and neighborhoods, and public open spaces themselves) allow spatial and functional reading of urban geometry. The ability of the three, independently, but mostly coordinated, offers arguments in order to get that public space was the center of the contemporary and future city project.

In the area of teaching on urban and territorial planning space to architects, our experimentation follows these premises. It gives us arguments to validate and keep on them thanks to their ability for making the future "technicians" to understand that they work in a socio-cultural complex entity (articulated and dynamic both in space and time) and to involve themselves in the decisions they will take.

KEYWORDS. Urban Structure; fragmentation periphery; middle landscape

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1. Situation: Approach the problem. Presentation of a Method

Countless well-intentioned projects, some of them outstanding in aesthetic and landscape quality, they fill open space in every city *which can afford*. Perhaps there is a higher number among historical areas or central spaces in general, but increasingly, those projects dot the fractured urban fabric of first and second peripheries. Furthermore, the examples that look out of themselves and are proposed as a net, using the natural element as their guideline, they are flourishing too. However, few of them achieve to weave a minimally stable universe of "urban" relationships. The problem is more evident and complex in the space between the center and periphery and between peripheries, where large infrastructures collapse every attempt of twining weaves.

New ideas emerge in the understanding of inherited space and in the organization of the new or the renovated future space, with outstanding contributions. Some of the projects to which we refer above are based on prominent figures from different streams of thought. However, we found in their approaches some dead spots, and even almost divergent positions in the diagnosis of "problem" and the solutions. We quote two groups that attack this complex reality in a different way:

On one side, we find those thoughts that try to shift the focus into a "new" theme, more or less complex, perhaps seeking a new market: new disciplinary attempts as Landscape Urbanism, Ecological Urbanism, Biophilic Urbanism etc. On the other side, we have the thoughts that try to think of a more general way about the orders of the urban fabric in which they try to detect the basic ingredients for becoming it in a human livable city. They are inheritors of the postmodern thinking in tradition of Alexander, Jacobs...

The first of named streams advocates for "a disciplinary realignment [...] in which landscape replaces architecture as the basic building block of contemporary urbanism" (WALDHEIM, 2006.11). Among the second, they also try to find "building blocks" but very different. They consider there are two basic and historical blocks, which are repeated in "human" cities: the named "sanctuary areas" [those made of "shed streets"] and the "main streets" (MEHAFFY et al., 2010.33). If the first current sees how in the Modern Movement in general and in the "open block" in particular there are an interest field on that advance, most of the rest see how the Modern Movement has produced disconnected pseudo-urban units, and has done much to destroy the foundations of a creative urban structure with ability to produce urban life when reformulating those they considered basic blocks (by the large neighborhood unit, zoning...).

The twentieth century, with the Modern Movement as mainstream in the creation and transformation of our cities, has left us a XXI century with a complex and problematic largely urbanized territory. We must internalize it in the historical continuum to which it belongs (a very substantial part in terms of produced surface). Landscape City and Fractal City are not incompatible versions for giving a lucid and creative answer to this inherited territory (in fact they themselves are not seen as opposites) and we can learn from both.

We do a quick critic judgment, looking at how we (planners and designers of space) are responding to the place and we mix it with our contributions on "design" and spatial configuration to create new places or weaves, in the most troubled areas of the urbanized territory:

– On the one hand planners have a historical deficit in the real practice of urbanism due to the inversion of projecting process that should support the essence of urban

fact: The thread of every city maker should be the public space in all its dimensions. Do we usually think the plan/project of city *from* public spaces (uses, access, distribution, connection...)? Do we do it in the city we have to revise, to recuperate, to re-habit, or to extend? And beyond, do we think it toward one "appropriated" but at the same time not denatured countryside (periurban, *rus-urban* environment)? Basically we take refuge in the allocation of uses and in the organization of frameworks, better or worst successful, internalizing, with more or less sensitivity, the natural and historical basis.

- On the other hand "designers" of space (architects of different landscapes) think from activity plots, sometimes with great inventive capacity, producing small areas of high environmental quality, or locating points where to insert the solar panel, to cover the façades, to experiment with new languages...

It seems like the scales were playing against us, setting two well-defined territories, but it is not neither the problem nor the debate. If it were so, it clearly would evidence why the places to which we refer are "no man's places" (because of uncertain scales). Sometimes vast areas are designed and created, like the large park (great or not great), and other times minimal units of actuation (as small frames) are planned. The epithets for the city referred before (landscape or fractal) already refer to ambiguous scales.

Really, the "basic block" of functional and spatial organization of cities along twentieth century has been the large road infrastructure. Only jumping from projecting "the full" to "the void", it doesn't allow to deal with the causes of the problem in depth. The contemporary landscape design has improved the attention toward the quality of design as well as toward the public spaces themselves. Notwithstanding, it may have moved away the designer's look from the real public and interactive substance of those spaces, focusing on the pure formal composition, well fitted in its physical and cultural context but with few relationship to the effective practices of spaces and to the interaction between them, that is, the relation to urban structure.

We propose a method of work involved in shaping and improving our urban spaces that starting **from** public space as driving force in the designing and re-designing process, arrives to the issue of Urban Structure, and vice versa, feeding constantly in a continuous process of "landscape" approaching and distance.

On this essential basis rests the educational experience we have developed over the last decade in the subject of Urban and Territorial Planning of Architecture School of Valladolid. We have experimented with the concept of urban structure and with its "triple/multiple" realization like physical and functional "device". We have also experimented with the ability of concept, mapping, and the applied design to ensure an interaction between pieces that shapes more than the sum of parts. We have applied it specifically in the last years working with transition areas. Within this "device", public space plays an irreplaceable role, while the *Design with Nature* and the bottom-up (natural and social agents) are essential variables, in a very particular way in these transitional areas, cases particularly critical.

Theory and practice feedback on these issues and lead us to make some reflections from two partial fields:

a) Reflections from a settled **methodology** and with signs of maturity. We think it has enough capacity to make understand, diagnose and propose corrections and contributions in a complex urban-territorial reality. These guidelines orient students who are beginning in planning from the opportunities and burdens that an architectural thinking (already rooted in the way they think and design) carries.

b) In particular, we draw conclusions from the results of **practical works**, developed from the "intermediate" scale of spaces of interaction between first and second peripheries of Valladolid. We do it through the analysis and diagnosis of these great pieces of city, and from the consequent further designing experimentation in them or outside them, understanding the interaction of the whole, or elsewhere, with the study fragment.

2. Contribution. Discipline Reflection

2.1. Theoretical defense of a "practical" method.

We propose two keys of projecting reading for the city and a third, a direct consequence of the synthetic and purposeful interpretation emanating from the first two:

-1. Understanding the urban "plot" (GARCÍA, 2000.13-45) or *genius loci*:

Attending to how the dialogue between built and open spaces was/is produced. The doubly (geological and social) historical incidence of the natural matrix with the pass of the years and the delimitation of that *plot of plots*. Elements from and for modelling the urban stuff.

-2. Working the urban structure as a physical support of urban life:

We understand urban structure as the physical and functional reality of the city, interpretable as its "basic geometry", and considered as a global system of interconnected elements. The three systems in which we decompose it correspond to the three major groups of relationships that articulate this urban reality: people and things movements; activities and spaces that demand the concentration and use by many people, with more or less diversity on the groups; and the encounter and enjoyment of public open spaces, with a potential parallel system to ally, the system that the nature is building independently in a constant process.

- Public space as a system. We understand the called green system -urban and suburban- like an infrastructure that carries out basic essential services to life in general and urban life in particular (FARIÑA, 2012). But just like "biophilic sensibility" can atrophy (BEATLEY, 2012), the social can too (the analogical). It's about to detect the spaces and the real elements where biodiversity and/or multiculturalism of the city can reside (biotope and *sociotope*): from the square to the walk, to the water network at all scales, to the agriculture space, to the wooded slopes... The precise articulation of the pieces that contribute to the "natural" and social quality will multiply the potential of themselves. This system must try to program a human scale city, in harmony with nature, and from public space we must know what to ask to the other two systems for getting it.

- Mobility and access (from pedestrian to logistics). From the drawing of road geometry, we can sense possibilities of accessibility and connectivity. These will be specified in the attribution of hierarchies and typologies, from its sections to the mobility they host. From these diagrams -and their readability- we can show gaps, barriers, fractures, imbalances in the system or in its historical generation, and its potential transformation into a more efficient and more compatible system with the structuring of the city from public space. Public transport, alternative mobilities (pedestrians and cyclists), and the interfaces between them (places born for exchanging) will have a higher capacity. The city needs a more integrated transport policy that articulates private mobility, parking, transport and walkability, setting measurable horizons and considering the urban processes that generate travels.

- Centralities and neighbourhoods (an equipment city). The recognition and location of different urban uses and the singling out of all of those that bring people together allows us to map a diagram of more or less hot and extensive points that warns us about where the stresses occur and where the ingredients for city life are combined or can do it. This meeting of people is understood in their pure diversity or in their segregation as an identifiable group, in age and time, in social classes, in work groups, or in the activity to which the congregation responds. The access to equipments and services informs us on the degree of compaction and mixture of uses in the city. The identification of broad spatial sets, mainly as "neighborhoods", the ultimate substratum of all urban reality (from parish and guild to segregated residential development, the public housing or to the "campus" of a given activity), this makes easy to us the detection of such access and mixture: what is the goal of each service and how many people serve those equipments to?

-3. **Corollary.** Toward a "ground design":

The novelty does not lie so much in evidence these three layers, which ones, in one way or another, appear in many of the reflection or regulatory documents on urban and regional planning (for example in Town Planning Act of *Castilla y León*, the territory in which we work). The novelty lies in understanding and thinking these layers in their complementarity, scaling, and spatial multidimensionality.

Before and after that we show this imperfect and temporary reality **in multilayer**, we must ask to us whether that needs our actions to evolve and develop favorably, and if so, what that needs (project-program). The social and natural feature of the city-artifact should guide the decisions frame. It is up to the designer to introduce his expertise in accommodation of spaces, design of borders, boundaries, permeabilities to the private and semi-private, organization of uses and flows... **thinking in the void as root instead of in the full.**

The transition from three-layer-structure to generation of a "unique" new or transformed, reality, to a "ground design", pass by anticipating the shapes of spaces and their relationships, understanding the triple nature of the conditions of them, that is environmental, functional, cultural. From (generic) spaces of work, residence, commerce ..., together or separately, emanate some requirements that determine the "architecture of plan." We understand the "ground design" like a coordinated and proactive deployment of the urban-structure layers and of that "architecture of plan", understanding in every moment the (multidimensional) public space like an engine from which thinking the city. This urban design needs an own and distinct logic (*to choose is to die*), if only the germ of a process.

We emphasize the importance of "intermediate" scale in this task. One that connects the whole and part, the allocation of uses to the use of space, the art of sitting to the environmental quality, the fitting of the great infrastructure with the spaces of everyday life, "the streets", and all of these together, fractured by such great infrastructure. Here the urban designer must be able to assist in returning to the public space their identity and integrity, as a unifying agent in the urban reality.

The city planning is **more** than Zoning+Infrastructure, it also has to do with anticipation of the form of the spaces and their relationships: from the urban structure to the "design of ground" through "the architecture of the plan". The "design" of public spaces should be much **less** than the freezing a piece of open-air museum. This proactive approach is intended to be so comprehensive in its thinking and understanding of urban complexity, as prudent in programmatic and designing decisions which ones derived from it.

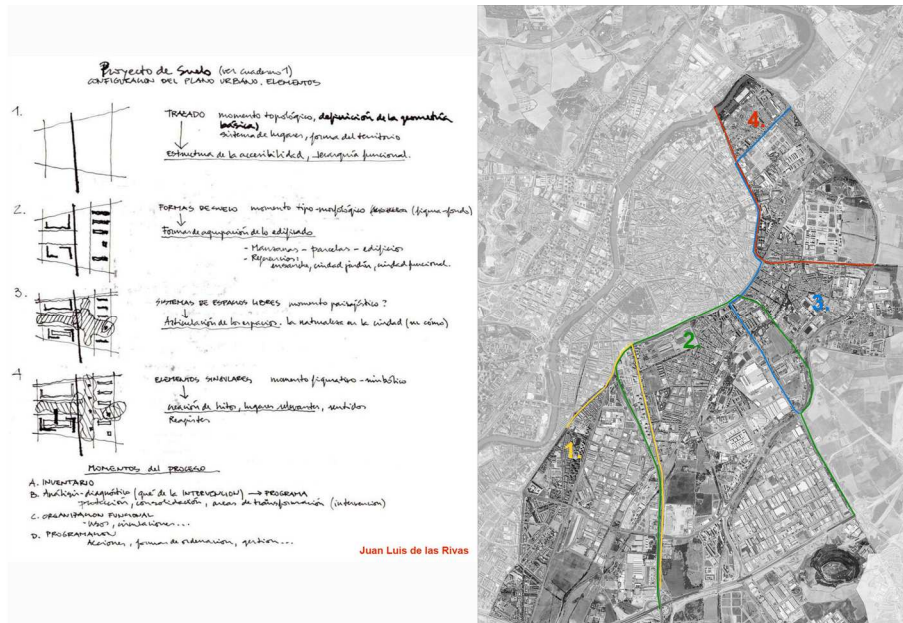


Fig.1

2.2. Empiric defense of a thinking Method.

We have over a decade experienced with the enunciated premises and we could prove that the described method is open and versatile in scales and themes, from the scale of a county or a continuum of these, articulated around a geographic element of coherence, such as their valley, to the scale of a continuous fragment of a more or less consolidated town, with natural and artificial components to value.

We have proved how a systematic process of articulation and subsequent mapping of the urban structure of Valladolid (from large fragments, and always referring them to their fit in the urban-regional global weave) in the layers that we have detailed, it has allowed to guide a diagnosis in terms of sustainability, according to degrees of diversity and compatible interactions. Specifically, in those crowns of first and second peripheries of an average (European) city, with a recurrent problem, the method allows quickly to show the potential intrinsic to the landscape we face, and the weaknesses thereof. We refer to the designing assessment of an existing landscape (omnipresent road infrastructures, hidden natures, activities and identities sometimes quite consolidated and others barely alive), and of a generated one that allows to articulate all those pieces in a more human scale reality.

In the developed works there is a rationalizing effort which working to redirect the apparent chaos to their possible orders. Works reach an order that, compared to an ever-changing reality, makes what seems "disorder" comes to be serving an urban thread: a project of the public stuff, understood from systems that support quality of city life.

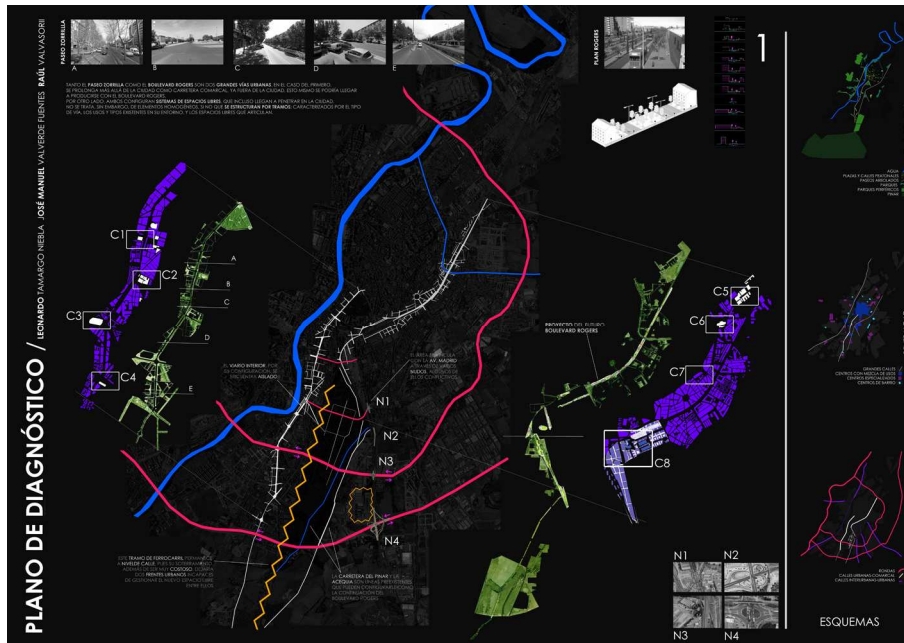


Fig.2.

From the same framework and process of synthetic and designing dimension, we can show different exercise groups based on how they face to the final stage, the one where they define and develop a specific design strategy:

- Creation of sequences: Perhaps the most recurrent and success proposals were those that show or generate a sequence of spaces (spaces linked by a more or less homogeneous route in terms of hierarchies and/or typologies). That sequence reconstructs a more complex narrative about the reality is going through, but at the same time more organized and friendly/propitious for urban interaction happens. The street is the basic element shaping the urban fabric, an interaction space which guarantees the spatial continuity and allows the creation of a structure of organized complexity.
- Transformation of part of a system in a multilayer program-project: that is, after understanding the requests/stresses to which that system is submitted by the other two systems, the exercise secures a program of actions and some kind of pre-design in order to orientate the consecution of the given intentions to those affected spaces. Mostly it happens in the transformation of the public space system, but now understood within its multi-dimensionality.
- Detection and development of greatest intensity points (in the same complex manner that the other groups).

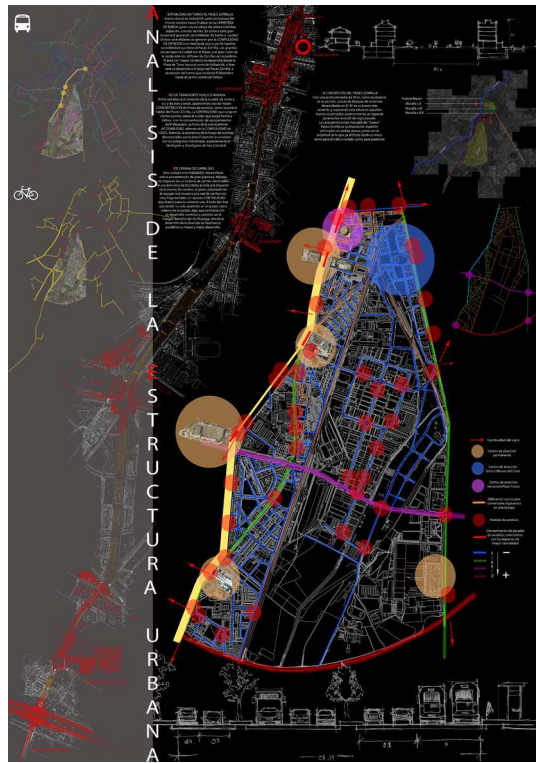
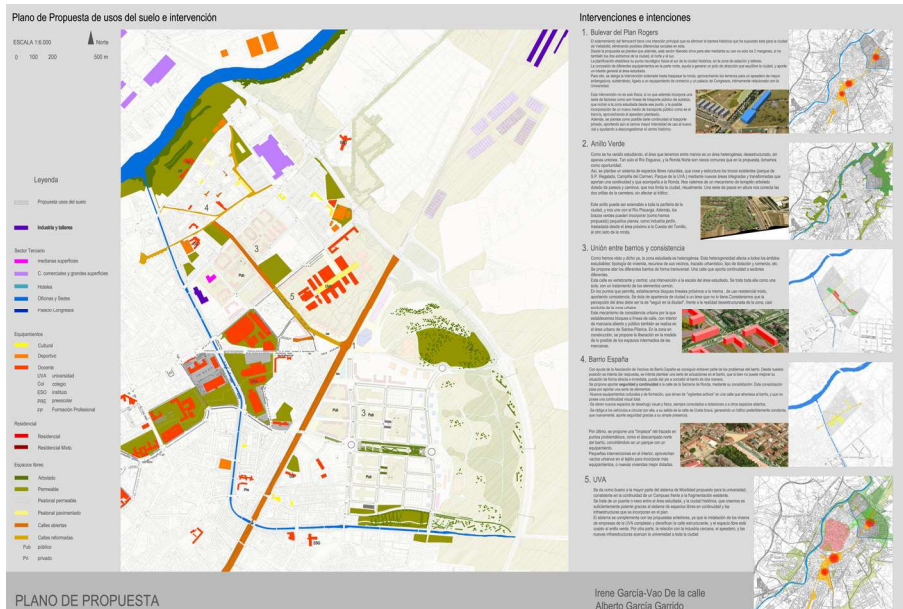


Fig.3-4



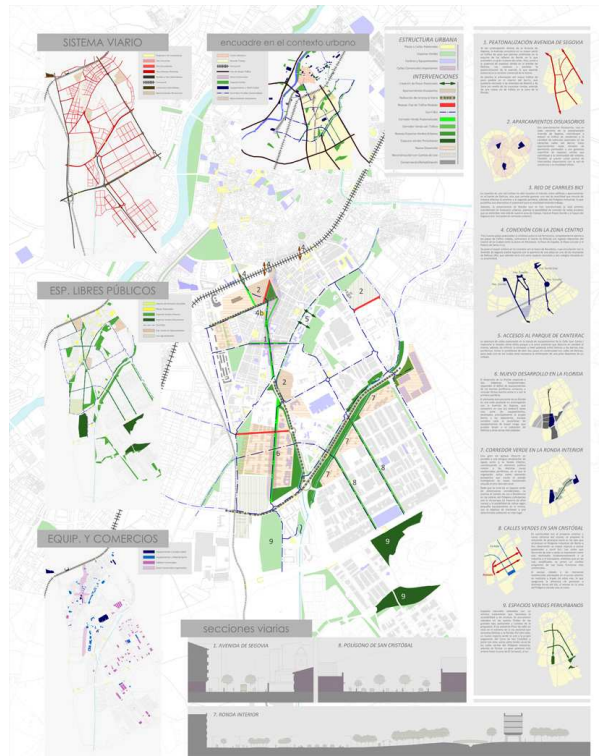


Fig.5.

3. Contextualizing

The method is able to incorporate contributions without losing its horizon:

We could assume many of the concepts developed in Corner's essay *Terra Fluxus*, in which he makes his contribution to the construction of a new way of operating in our territories. Thus, we would say that essentially what we propose could be a *de facto* "landscape urbanism" such as Corner understands it when he says that "the union of landscape with urbanism promises new relational and systemic workings across territories of vast scale and scope, situating the parts in relation to the whole"; or when he believes that "public space in the city must surely be more than mere token compensation or vessels for this generic activity called 'recreation', [that] public spaces are firstly the containers of collective memory and desire, and secondly they are the places for geographic and social imagination to extend new relationships and sets of possibilities". Or when, defending the processes as the first theme of the new discipline, he suggests "shifting attention away from the object qualities of space (whether formal or scenic) to the systems that condition the distribution and density urban form" (CORNER, 2006, 24-33). Here there is a (prospective) philosophy where possibly the least important issue was the headline with which it is trying to make its stellar appearance. In fact, Corner never hides as direct sources (there are some other much more "original" or orphan contributions) McHarg, Jensen and Olmsted, and he does not deny his sympathy toward thoughts

of the cultural geographer Harvey, or in an apparently opposite end, toward the architecture-star Koolhaas, so ironic as stimulating when he talks about urbanism.

Similarly we can echo reflections such as those of the ecologist-urbanist Rueda, or the mathematician-architect Salingaros, and others, in the Alexander or Jacobs's footsteps when they defend a complex urbanism of the three dimensions (RUEDA, 2008), or one for a biophilic city, which permits *access to an anxiety-free environment: public urban space, open-access residential and commercial spaces* (SALINGAROS, 2011). Even when they argue that "The degree of 'life' in a city or region of a city is tied to the complexity of visual, geometrical and path [as information and/or people networks] connections", or that "there is an increasing awareness that a city needs to be understood as a complex interacting system, different types of urban systems overlapping to build up urban complexity in a living city" (SALINGAROS, 2005,116-118,blurb).

Although we sometimes can intuit that both currents believe that applying their methods and arguments to the urban project gives it an irrefutable saving capacity, concepts like process, emergency (of unanticipated actors), interaction... are recurrent in their essays. Maybe we cannot guarantee from spatial planning the welfare of every individual citizen, but we can contribute decisively to involve them (and therefore the true builders) of a common and shared space, facilitating access, continuity, efficiency in resource consumption and generosity in setting their value.

4. Epilogue

No possible choice between creating/designing the place or plotting the weave. "A good designer must be able to weave the diagram and the strategy in relationship to the tactile and the poetic" (CORNER, 2006,32). Although it may seem that the aforementioned *currents* are more focused on one or another issue, there is a brave attempt to understand the forces that generate the urban *landscape* (CALZOLARI, 2012.19, say "image of the dynamic structure of the territory"), with the goal of contributing with something positive, shelter while stimulus, to this uncertain future from spatial configuration of itself. We need to be aware of how society lives in the city, to cause small adjustments of that "inhabiting the landscape", because "a city is more than a place in space, is a drama in time" (GEDDES). The future of our cities will always depend on the people, who set up their space, their refuge, their vital interaction points...

Legends

Fig. 1. Left: Theoretic diagram of Process. DE LAS RIVAS, J.L. Right: Valladolid, Four Peripheries Areas as study cases. Composition: JIMÉNEZ, M.

Fig. 2. Academic exercise for Zone 1. An initial phase: Detection of problems and values for zone of study in particular and for the whole urbanized territory in general. TAMARGO, L., VALVERDE, J.M. & VALVASORI, R. (2012)

Fig. 3. Academic exercise for Zone 1. An intermediate phase: From analysis to diagnosis through Urban Structure understanding in three systems. Existing situation. ÁLVAREZ, P. & SANTOS, A. (2012)

Fig. 4. Academic exercise for Zone 4. A semi-final phase: Strategies of intervention for determined sequences, areas, and points. GARCÍA, A.&GARCÍA-VAO, I. (2010)

Fig. 5. Academic exercise for Zone 2. An intermediate phase: From diagnosis to anticipation of strategies through Urban Structure understanding in three systems. Proposed situations. CREGO, O. & ESTEBAN, D. (2011)

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Biography

Marina Jiménez Jiménez. Architect by School of Architecture, Valladolid University, 1999. PhD (2009) and at present Assistant Professor at the same university (Department of Urbanism). She's specialized in the field of planning and urban design, particularly in the relationship between the city and "its" natural and public spaces. Researcher of the *Instituto Universitario de Urbanística* (IUU).

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*As members of IUU, all of them have collaborated on pioneer works and research about urbanism in the *Castilla y León* Region (Spain).