

ONE HUNDRED POST-WAR NEIGHBOURHOODS, TODAY (ASTURIAS AND LEÓN)

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From the end of the Civil War to the early years of the 1960s the state promoted more than one hundred public housing settlements in cities, towns and villages in the provinces of Asturias and León. They are part of the post-war reconstruction process but they also served to meet the needs identified by population growth, by the heyday of mining and by large industrial projects developed with better or worse luck in times of International isolation. The residential complexes are very diverse in nature, for their disparate sizes (from one hundred to two thousand households) and for the morphological models used, where appropriate inspired on the Garden City, Le Corbusier or the concept of New Village. The position and weight within the settlement where they belong also varies considerably, because there remain large neighbourhoods that are completely diluted within the frame of the largest cities compared to others of smaller size but which still represent the largest part of a small population, something common in mining areas. There are also very diverse the ways of perceiving them or the social image people have of them as they are very well appreciated, especially when there are colonies of semidetached houses with garden or vegetable plot, but most have suffered the stigma of stereotypes concerning poverty, poor habitability, conflict or social exclusion. Their geographical interest is great, because they have represented a fundamental element in town planning, landscapes and lifestyles, particularly in the valleys and factory areas. But the object of this article is not making a historical research because there is already published work of this nature, although not enough to cover the whole subject. What deserve more attention are now the problems, conflicts and policies to improve the wide range of processes and transformations that are experiencing, either positive or negative. The information comes from field work, the data provided by neighbourhoods and civic organizations, plus the documentation available on municipal and regional planning, housing and social dynamics.

The practical difficulties with which post-war housing was developed, in a dictatorial context of widespread corruption, and the usual lack of urbanization and settlement services, have represented an inexhaustible source of trouble and expense to the Administration. With the arrival of Democracy the magnitude of urban construction deficiencies forced them to invest heavily to equip, reform and even rebuild neighbourhoods threatened by rising

vacancy. Over this period the delivery of land titles to residents begins, once they were repaid, although some houses owned by enterprises still remain in rental. Some of the new owners initiated quick sale procedures, encouraged by the increased value brought by the various improvements. Currently the settlements are an increasingly complex world, with very diverse local casuistry, which are essentially the result of a set of variables. A geographic diagnosis should start by establishing different categories of urban problems and social tensions, its origins and translation in low performance. On one side are the demographics and coexistence aspects, including the ageing population, the desertification (not in the big cities) and sometimes the arrival of substitute groups, some of them foreigners or gypsies when comfort is lacking. In that case drug trafficking and violence can be present, but there are only exceptionally marginal or dangerous situations. Most of the examples studied are stable and safe districts. Moreover, it is necessary to take into account the problems of habitability, which in its most extreme cases have resulted in accidents, demonstrating the need to reinforce the architectural structures, and sometimes to build new houses. There are very frequent protest and demonstrations by the inhabitants, caused by poor maintenance and structural problems of buildings. Each time there are new claims, they reopen the debate about security and the life expectancy of many of these neighbourhoods, which could represent a conflict for the government. Today, poor housing conditions have records of low prices in Asturias and León, and they are always located villages in recession because of the closure of mines.

Another factor that is very important in the current dynamics is the relative position of each settlement within their immediate geographical environment, inside the nucleus of population to which it belongs. Originally, many real state developments of the post-war period were conditioned negatively by their physical remoteness, poor accessibility and proximity to urban elements that cause rejection, but there are exceptions in places in the Asturian valleys of the rivers Caudal and Nalón, where lack of space forces to settle in more central public housing sites. The passage of time seems to establish a widening gap between the townships that retain negative characteristics, and those that experience positive changes in their geographic position. Urban growth has made settlements of official housing in interior districts to be placed in the centre. Many times the near by areas have also changed with the disappearance or physical barriers (historical railway lines) or obsolete urban elements: factories, mines, slaughterhouses and hospitals almost always associated with coal mining or heavy industry, which occupied large tracts of land. In their place there are shopping centres, cultural services and bus stations, in addition to university campuses as well as entrepreneurial centres. The bad environmental conditions of the past have been partially solved by introducing new green areas, and the immediate aura may experience even greater regeneration when new residential areas are created. Thus the change in geographical context gives rise to greater economic and social value of many neighbourhoods (or at least the land they occupy), which results in reformation or creation of new neighbourhoods.

The rehabilitation and redevelopment of housing groups in Franco's regime, do not arise only when the favourable geographical environment changes, but they have a more universal character. The neighbourhood's rehabilitation has spread progressively throughout the late twentieth century, with different formulas (including the declaration of Areas of Integrated Rehabilitation) although the main way of financing has been the National Plan of Coal

Mining, i.e. the so-called mining funds used in almost 2/3 of total cases. The intervention varies from a regenerative integral action, or could be limited to the common areas. It is also variable the distribution of costs amongst the State, the Autonomous Community, the Municipality and the residents who must pay. When the operation is classified as of social interest, by its magnitude and by the low solvency of the inhabitants, the amount the residents pay is minimal. Improvements include almost always a renewal of basic networks (water networks, sewerage, telephone, gas and lighting), regeneration of public spaces and restoring the facades of buildings, at least in Asturias. The urban solution normally adopted in the lands that lie between the blocks of flats is quite controversial as it consists generally in reducing trees and landscaped areas created by the first democratic councils to expand the parking areas and paved areas. In this common denominator there is also a variable portion of reforms, usually confined to the buildings (roofs, strengthening structures and removal of barriers) or related to the services (schools, geriatric care). All this positively influences the comfort but also often contributes to the revaluation and therefore becomes expensive.

The current situation in the neighbourhoods, either stable or suffering from morphological, functional and social transformations in different directions, depends essentially on two sets of factors, some are endogenous and some come from outside, i.e. the urban environment. Among the former it is fundamental the character of the settlement and its starting conditions, because there is a gap between settlements with individual or semidetached houses with gardens, used to reward families linked to the regime, and the budget houses that are destined for people living in shacks. It is essential to consider the degree of residential satisfaction offered by each settlement (dense or open habitat), the existence of green areas or public services, and the size of the houses. Of course, the Garden City neighbourhoods are most valued, and in the other neighbourhoods the small size of the majority of the flats (50 square meters or less) does not represent an obstacle today as the moderately priced modern buildings also have small houses. Sometimes more influence in the current situation has the social image of the neighbourhoods, especially if it is unfavourable, although it may change because of rehabilitation. On the other hand we must consider, in a separate group, external variables, which come from local and regional environment. Is not the same to belong to one region or another due to the differences in government's policy, availability of financial resources or home ownership, as in León a greater number of businesses owned the houses. It is also very relevant the size of the population where the neighbourhood is, its character more or less dynamic and its degree of dependence on mining. Generally, in the largest cities, the post-war housing developments are better valued and are subject to a residential conquest that makes them fully occupied. In less valued settlements, i.e. small cities, towns and villages, they often appear increased underemployment and negative trends, although there are enough exceptions in district capitals where youths are installed in old public housing because they find cheaper prices. Finally, the transformation of their immediate environment significantly influences the fate of a neighbourhood, where there are factors specific to the city centre as in Gijón and León.

To give more depth to the investigation we analyse the behaviour of the two major morphological categories: single-family neighbourhoods and collective housing. The first, low-density settlements called Garden City, are especially valued for this improved environmental conditions. In declining mining towns we notice combined processes of abandonment and

rehabilitation, the latter by recent buyers, which in mountain areas are acquired even as second homes for holidays. In the cities, settlements are usually fully occupied, with mixed social compositions, traditional people and new young families, often with significantly higher economic level. In such cases alterations or renovations of buildings take place when they have some value or interest, otherwise they are blown down gradually orderly or spontaneously. Some nuclei undergo a metamorphosis so important that they end up as clusters of modern buildings, with densities higher than the original occupation (heights up to three floors) and a decrease in open spaces and green areas in each plot. The other set of neighbourhoods is shaped by multi-family units, where different situations can also occur. These depend primarily on the economic evolution of the nucleus where they belong, the dynamic in the immediate environment, and the existence of inherited conditions of marginality. When these factors are adverse, the settlement is degraded, materially and socially, it is even abandoned altogether, and in some occasions it can be demolished, although partial depopulation, physical deterioration and ageing are more frequent conveying the idea of a fossil site. At the upper levels of the urban network the occupation is complete and it is usually accompanied by population replacement processes that give access to young foreigners, although no significant concentrations are achieved in any district because it is a recent process. Other districts assessed, due to the positive effect of rehabilitation in their living conditions, or to lack of an inherited negative image, have more stable positions or progressive developments. They receive tenants or buyers of flats, sometimes young Spaniards which value the improved services. In some cases their arrival helps to stimulate the development of a commercial function traditionally absent, particularly if the environment of the neighbourhood is an active space.