

RAFAEL SUÁREZ MUÑIZ

Professional geographer. Consultoría Estudios Urbanos

Origin and development of the urban extension of Gijón from the leisure spaces (1850-1941)

I. INTRODUCTION. SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

This research was born from a deep knowledge of two parallel realities, the origins of the bourgeois expansion of Gijón (La Arena neighborhood) and all the leisure spaces¹ of the city over a century (1850-1941). The hypothesis to be tested is that the neighborhood of La Arena was not born as a need for bourgeois housing, but as a mechanism for obtaining capital gains and land revaluation without building, using the LS to attract social flows, ultimately translated into possible new residents. The LS were the drivers of residential occupation, always ahead of the phases of urban growth.

This paradigmatic case at national level has been evident from the cartographic reproduction of unpublished historical plans.

II. LEISURE SINGULARITY OF GIJÓN REGARDING TO THE SPANISH URBAN EXTENSIONS (1860-1936)

Unlike most Spanish cities of the Old Regime, the fortifications of Gijón were demolished to project a hypothetical population widening for the bourgeoisie. A minority resident bourgeoisie that at no time conceived this area as their new social area, power or leisure, in order to meet their ostentatious needs. The result was a late oc-

cupation that lasted a century in filling the neighborhood. In Gijón the great leisure spaces were established surrounding the new urban limits. They were private leisure spaces at the mercy of speculation, solving an urban grid devoid of public green spaces.

III. SPATIO-TEMPORAL GENESIS OF LA ARENA NEIGHBORHOOD

On December 17, 1853, the City Council of Gijón brought to public auction the land of the sandy area of San Lorenzo at the request of the Marquis of Casa Valdés in 1850. These lands delimited by Capua street (W), San Lorenzo beach (N), the Costa road (S) and the Piles river (E) were divided into 3 pieces. The western one (277.389 m²) to Félix Valdés de los Ríos, the eastern (84.348 m²) to Romualdo Alvargonzález Sánchez, and the wooded gardens of La Florida (central-southern sector of 47.904 m²) were zoned and qualified for leisure uses and public entertainment. The border between both sectors exerted the current street Piles.

In 1863 and 1867, the first two expansion projects were elaborated, in which the military engineer Francisco García de los Ríos, and the architects Lucas María Palacios and Juan Díaz, intervened. The new lands began to be divided in 1868 coinciding with the demolition of the walls. The liberation of this fortified space generated a perimeter system of parks and squares (public green spaces)².

¹ Leisure spaces, from now on: LS.

² San Miguel square was the only public green space that had the nineteenth century urban extension.

IV. DIRECTIONAL MOTIVATION OF URBAN GROWTH AND URBANIZATION PHASES

The extension of the population led the nineteenth-century urban growth from Capua street towards the East; not to run into the particular properties of important families such as the Cienfuegos (to the South), and the manorial preserve of the Marquis of San Esteban (to the West), as well as the discontinuity that the Langreo railway would generate. The lands used were those of the sandy area of San Lorenzo to belong to the property of the City Council. The aforementioned road was opened after the demolition of the wall and the first streets began to open in 1868; the longitudinal axes (W-E) finished to be drawn in 1875 while the transversal axes (N-S) were not completed until 1890-1895. The northern limit was solved with a marine stroll, gaining much land to the sea, which was not a reality until the second decade of the 20th century. The surroundings of Capua Street and the square of San Miguel began to be built in 1877.

From the initial moment a process of creation of unnecessary urban land is already intuited. The densification in the late nineteenth century did not exceed the streets that led to the square of San Miguel. The building volume did not exceed two-three floors. This occupational slowness was caused because the *jovellanista* expansion still had an important unoccupied reservoir of bourgeois housing. Therefore, the 19th century extension did not suppose a pressing need, hid speculative ends.

The main mechanism of real-estate speculation, apart from the purchase and sale and the progressive establishment of LS, was the not legal construction of substandard workers houses (citadels) since the last third of the century. In most cases they were self-constructed, with collective spaces inside the block backyard that were leased by the owners of the buildings. The consequences were a precarious habitability due to overcrowding, the lack of sanitary services, drinking water and electricity; and the profit of the land owners with the backyards of the blocks³.

The complete urban development of the neighborhood of La Arena lasted a century. Until the decade of the 1940, the dense building did not exceed the Premio Real and the Playa streets, hence we speak of two halves. The western, original of the bourgeois class and first to deal with; and the east, from the aforementioned streets to the

avenue of Castilla, more oriented to the current upper-middle classes, which ended up with the first buildings of the Modern Movement (1950-1955) and the development blocks between 1968 and 1975 (between Menéndez Pelayo street and the avenue of Castilla). The growth, therefore, has had about 80 years of difference between one half and another, due to its lack of need and inaccessibility to the real estate park by the popular classes due to the increasing cost of it.

V. THE PROLIFERATION OF LEISURE SPACES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE EDIFICATORY PROCESS

1. THE COVERED SPECULATION

The absence of green spaces and recreation in the neighborhood of La Arena (until the democratic planning) and the narrowness of the road network is due to the particular interests of the owners of the land and the pressures towards the designers. This begins to show some of the reasons why the location of LS is perimeter. Another factor that determines a geographical distribution of leisure eccentrically is the qualification of the soil. Until 1921, the existing land beyond the coast road to the south, and Piles Street to the East, was not considered urban land⁴.

The eccentric location of the LS was very advantageous for its promoters, large areas of flat and cheap land (for not being urban), connected and articulated with the urban center and the parish of Somió by means of the tram. All this with the objective of not torpedoing the capital gains that would generate the large quadrangular lots of the urban extension⁵.

2. ADVANCEMENT OF LEISURE SPACES AND EQUIPMENT FOR REFUSING TO RESIDENTIAL OCCUPATION

The urban extension was a whimsical craving for the bourgeoisie from its origins to the bubble of *desarrollismo*, and the LS de Gijón of the period 1850-1936 had the

³ The delimiting constructions of the blocks used to have a low background, which released soil percentages of the order of 50% that was resolved as interior patios to house most of the time working rooms.

⁴ Urban-legal conditions favored the establishment of large LS, since the City Council did not ask for building permits or planimetry in the plant since it was not considered an urban area.

⁵ One of the typical practices was, for that reason in few occasions we talked about buildings, the rapid installation of small delimiting constructions of the apples to indicate the definitive angles and alignments. Hence, the use of chamfers is so small.

same nature. Founding partners, shareholders and developers coincided in some of the recreational societies, as well as in the Tramways Company. The trams, in addition to the intra-urban articulation, constituted an important vector of the flow of claimants and enjoyment of leisure, which was projecting towards the East. It was the perfect business since transportation, housing, and leisure were latent needs of society in Gijón.

The LS in Gijón were also used to distort the presence of equipment considered as rejection, especially concentrated in the eastern half of the expansion. These were industries such as the Gas Factory (1869), Vereterra and Cangas (Avenida de Castilla), and Zarracina (El Tejedor), the municipal slaughterhouse in front of the sandy area –the beach that was not used for popular fear–, the mouth of the Piles river, which was used as an animal cemetery, and the infectious focus of the previous quagmire to Isabel la Católica park.

A) La Florida, Campos Elíseos and the Obdulia theater-circus

The green space of La Florida (1853) reserved for public solace, was privatized in 1873 by the company Los Campos Elíseos. In this space, the first theater-circus of Asturias was built (one of the most capacity in Spain), which remained as a cinema until 1964. It was also used as a fairground, velodrome and tennis club, among other forms of leisure.

B) Gardens and walk of Begoña: summer festivities, cinemas, theaters and bullfights

This wooded space was inaugurated as a walk in 1875 when the wall was demolished. In 1851 it began to be the scene of the diverse popular celebrations, and even the second bullfighting space of the city (1861). In the area of Begoña-Los Campinos, the first itinerant and then permanent shows were offered in music halls, cinemas and theaters.

C) The spa activity and the popularization of San Lorenzo beach

Between 1874 and 1883 the beach of San Lorenzo ceased to be viewed with suspicion when the first bath-houses were established. The next qualitative leap was the conversion into spas (there were 5), missing in the Civil War. Spa activity –much more elitist– generated a spatial segregation of the beach, which did not have

a seafront until 1915. The beach was a private space, whose only possible access was through the ticket office of the spas and paying. It began to become popular between 1910 and 1915 because of the creation, on the other hand, of the select nautical clubs.

D) Bullring of El Bibio

The bullring (1888) had a capacity capable of hosting a third of the population. It was situated in a frequent bullfighting location in Spain, far from the population. This LS was one of the directors of residential growth to the East, favored along with the Campos Elíseos by the tram. Until the decade of 1950 it was not municipally.

E) Velodrome of the Cuesta brothers

The promoters of cycling in Asturias drew a velodrome between 1893-1895 next to their family home (Emilio Tuya street). It was certainly a private space but open for public use and training of cyclists. Before 1925 he had disappeared⁶.

F) El Molinón stadium and Isabel la Católica park

These great LS marked the eastern limit to the residential aspirations of the urban expansion. They were made on lands of Romualdo Alvargonzález not dedicated to urbanization in closed block. The first football matches in El Molinón date back to 1908. The Isabel la Católica park was a milestone in urban regeneration (1941-1956), drying out all that area flooding by the meanders of the river Piles.

G) Gijón Tennis Club

The first two tennis societies of Gijón were established in 1910 and 1911, on the eastern flank of the bullring and on the Campos Elíseos, respectively. In El Bibio tennis was played until 1936, and in the Continental until the mid-1940s.

H) Jovellanos football field

The third of the block that used to occupy this field (Ezcurdia Street) was reserved and fenced in 1919. It dis-

⁶ This information has been provided by Daniel García de la Cuesta, great-grandson of the aforementioned Cuesta brothers. And it has been collated with cartographic and photographic sources, as well as news in the press.

appeared in the decade of 1940, passing into other sporadic uses; and it was not built until 1968. A clear example of the bourgeois pretensions with the widening.

I) La Florida football field

In this field located between Vicente Innerarity and Alarcón streets football matches were played until the 1956/1957 season. Then the site was also used for other sports (athletics). It remained as a site until it was built in 1966.

J) Grupo Covadonga

It was the private society that promoted the great majority of sports that we know today, and developed them both in its facilities on the Molino Street, and abroad. It was an block given in 1935 that had a pediment, tennis court, athletics circuit, basketball court, bowling, etc. In 1973 these facilities were abandoned to build in 1975 and move to a new headquarters in Las Mestas (1969).

CONCLUSIONS

Unlike other Spanish cities, in Gijón it was decided to project one of the first urban extensions projects that fol-

lowed those of 1860 due to a need for bourgeois housing outside the walls that was not real, which made the creation of this new urban land unnecessary. Until the 1940s it continued to be built in the Improvement Plan sector. On the other hand, the residential occupation of the urban extension of the sandy area of San Lorenzo at that time was still 50% with very low densities of bourgeois housing and a high degree of proletarian overcrowding in citadels. In the 1950s, the eastern half was practically empty and devoid of residential construction. It took a century to occupy the widening with building of high densities. Until the 1970s, many blocks maintained non-residential uses.

The paradigmatic issue of this case of study within the national panorama of urban extensions is that the neighborhood of La Arena experienced an occupation before leisure and industrial than residential. But that appearance of LS was not exactly within the urban expansion as in the rest of Spanish cases, but in a perimeter manner and of a private nature. All these LS, as you can see in the cartography, were always materialized before the building marking the limits and direction of urban growth. They maintained non-residential uses.

The physical, social and shareholding connection of the Tramways Company with these great spaces was the best mechanism to revalue the surrounding land, generating great expectations of habitability.