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## *Urban green space planning in four Catalan river cities. The Spanish Land Act (Ley del Suelo) as an opportunity for urban transformation*

### I. INTRODUCTION

The river environment presents different levels of ecosystem quality depending on seasonal variability but, more especially, on the anthropic pressures derived from industrial development, land use and human settlement. Although during much of the nineteenth century Europe's major rivers represented the "commercial gateways" into their cities, during the first half of the twentieth century the first environmental problems associated with river ecosystems began to emerge. In Mediterranean urban areas, the degradation of river courses has been the result of a complex process, reflecting multiple socio-economic changes in the territorial planning and with significant consequences for the natural environment.

However, the intensive use of urban river areas during the last century has been combined with other activities that are more compatible with the environment, being derived as they are from the direct use of the areas resources. Thus, urban and peri-urban agriculture has played an essential role in the historical transformation of these spaces, and has materialized in the shape, for example, of urban gardens along riverfronts. This has contributed, in some cases, to the development of a landscape of great cultural value.

The urban and peri-urban riverscapes have also been historically productive, since they have been used for agriculture and livestock, forestry and hunting, activities that, in recent decades, have been reduced or replaced by industry, leisure and tourism. Indeed, the transformation of the urban river spaces is a phenomenon that began to

materialize in Europe in the 1970s, '80s and '90s. Several authors coincide in identifying three key factors in this urban transformation: first, the regularisation and greater control of the flood risk; second, a growing environmental awareness throughout society; and third, the historical evolution and functional loss of the uses and activities that traditionally existed in these spaces.

### II. THE ROLE OF EUROPEAN AND SPANISH REGULATIONS GOVERNING THE MANAGEMENT OF URBAN RIVER SPACES

A series of measures and regulations have emerged in response to the problems generated by the degradation of the environment of Europe's rivers in recent decades. These measures not only focus on water as a resource and on the management of river ecosystems, but are also concerned with achieving compatibility with human actions. One such regulation, of critical importance for Europe and Spain, is the so-called Water Framework Directive (2000/60/CE). The concept of an *integrated* water policy, free of sectoral approaches, is the main characteristic of this particular measure. Parallel to the implementation of the Water Framework Directive, river areas in Europe have also been regulated in terms of various technical parameters, including flood risk and urban planning. In Spain, this has been achieved, on the one hand, by the adoption of the European legal framework established by Directive 2007/60/EC, on the assessment and management of flood risks and, on the other, through the regula-

tion of the natural watercourses (*Real Decreto 849/1986, de 11 de abril, por el que se aprueba el Reglamento del Dominio Público Hidráulico que desarrolla los títulos preliminar, I, IV, V, VI, VII y VIII del Texto Refundido de la Ley de Aguas, aprobado por el Real Decreto Legislativo 1/2001, de 20 de julio*), which establishes a zoning of the river spaces from the perspective of permitted uses in line with given return periods.

Apart from these technical criteria, Spain's river spaces have also been regulated by the implementation of urbanistic rules, specifically the first town planning legislation to be approved in the country: namely, the Land Act (*Ley de 12 de mayo de 1956 sobre régimen del suelo y ordenación urbana*), which is the cornerstone of Spain's urban planning law. The planning instruments studied in this article are in all cases the direct result of this legislation and a subsequent amendment (specifically, *Ley 19/1975, de 2 de mayo, de reforma de la Ley sobre régimen del suelo y ordenación urbana*). Other regulations include the *Plan General de Ordenación Urbana* (that is, the general urban land-use plan, henceforth the PGOU), which is the basic instrument for the integrated territorial planning of one or more municipalities, and the *Plan Especial* (that is, the special plan, henceforth the PE), which provides for the specific applications of the PGOU. All these instruments have historically organized the urban space as a whole and have also addressed, in certain cases, the planning of the river spaces.

One of the great advances made by the first Spanish Land Act (1956) was that it qualified, for the first time and in a comprehensive manner, the free spaces reserved for the leisure activities of Spain's citizens. This provision meant municipal urban planners had to reserve 10% of the surface area for public parks and gardens. In practice, its application meant that city architects and urban planners—the authors of the municipal (PGOU) and special (PE) plans— had to designate new free spaces (parks and public gardens) throughout the city. In the case of Spain's river cities, this was to have a marked impact. These planning requirements were also included in the reformed 1975 Land Act, which, among other specifications of a clearly expansive view, provided for a minimum of 5 m<sup>2</sup> of green space per inhabitant.

### III. OBJECTIVES, SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

Our main objective in this article is to analyse various river cities in Catalonia (NE Spain) that can be considered significant examples of the relevant role played by

the Land Act (1956) and its subsequent reform (1975), constituting as it did the legal basis for the creation and concentration of public green spaces in river areas. In this study, we consider these *green spaces* as being all those areas of parks or gardens under public ownership that have been projected or expanded since the 1950s down to the present day in each of the cities analysed. Green areas associated with traffic or those that are privately owned are not considered. For this study we have selected four cities that can be deemed representative of the intrinsic diversity of the Catalan territory and which present very different demographic, economic, social, urban and environmental characteristics—Manlleu (pop. 20,007), Terrassa (pop. 216,428), Lleida (pop. 137,327) and Sant Adrià de Besòs (pop. 36,624).

The analysis of these four case studies has required the examination of the urban plans that arose from the approval of the Land Act (1956) and its reform (1975). Specifically, therefore, our study includes the analysis of the Manlleu urban plan (*Plan General de Ordenación Urbana* of 1964), three Terrassa urban plans (*Plan General de Ordenación Urbana* of 1951, *Plan General de Ordenación Urbana* of 1983 and *Plan Especial del Parque de Vallparadís* of 1989), two urban plans for Lleida (*Plan General de Ordenación Urbana* of 1952-1958 and *Plan General Municipal de Ordenación Urbana* of 1979-1995) and, finally, the Sant Adrià del Besòs metropolitan plan (*Plan General Metropolitano de Barcelona*, 1976). All these sources have been consulted in their respective historical archives (*Archivo Municipal de Manlleu, Archivo Municipal del Ayuntamiento de Terrassa, Archivo Municipal de Lleida* and *Fondo Metropolitano de la Biblioteca del Área Metropolitana de Barcelona*).

### IV. SUMMARY OF THE FOUR CATALAN CASE STUDIES

In the case studies undertaken in Catalonia, what is especially evident is the central role played by the *Plan General* in all municipal planning decisions. Albeit under different names, the *Plan General*, without exception, provides the main planning objectives and lays down the strategies for tackling urban-river spaces. This indicates, first and foremost, that cities that have developed along the banks of a river present a broad set of specific characteristics that their urban plans seek to address. Thus, although the main urban regeneration work in the cases studied took place in the 1980s and 1990s, the municipal planning documents drawn up in the 1950s, '60s and '70s

saw the river spaces as a critical element of the urban fabric: in short, they constituted the primary elements of the cities' large scale projects.

In Manlleu, the *Plan General de Ordenación Urbana* of 1964 proposed a thematic redevelopment of the riverfront, focused on promoting its use for sports and recreational activities. In Terrassa, the *Plan General de Ordenación Urbana* of 1951 proposed a solution for the torrential river that runs through the heart of the city: the park-way of Vallparadís which, although not definitively approved by the council, was resurrected in the *Plan Especial del Parque de Vallparadís* of 1989. In Lleida, the *Plan General de Ordenación Urbana* of 1952-1958 considered it a priority to plan, from both an architectonic and aesthetic perspective, the buildings constructed or projected along the Segre's riverfront. Here, an additional priority was that of overcoming deficiencies in mobility between the river's two banks. The *Plan General Municipal de Ordenación Urbana* of 1979-1995 recognized that the Segre needed to receive special attention and that it should be the subject of a joint action, being considered a space suitable for use as a green zone.

In the case of Sant Adrià de Besòs, not only are there highly interesting historical precedents (not least the proposal for a "Great Forest" contained in the *Plan Cerdà* of 1859), but the *Plan General Metropolitano* of 1976, while classifying large stretches of the river banks as green spaces, also stressed the important role to be played by new largescale communication infrastructure. As such, without exception, the urban planning documents analysed here all address the question of the management of urban river spaces, albeit by formulating quite distinct directives, strategies and solutions for each specific case.

One of the more obvious conclusions to draw from our research is the great impact historical advances have had on the planning legislation enacted between the 1950s and 1970s in Spain. The introduction of the first Spanish Land Act (1956) and its subsequent reform (1975) mark a "before" and "after" in the management of the urban-river spaces in the Catalan case studies analysed here. Indeed, this legislation is the main legal instrument responsible for the provision and creation of green spaces along Catalonia's riverbanks. It is evident that in the cases of Manlleu and Terrassa, the legal requirement that all *Planes Generales* assign no less than 10% of the managed land area to parks and gardens was fundamental in the provision of green spaces in their urban river areas. In Manlleu, the *Plan General de Ordenación Urbana* of 1964, which adopted the directives of the 1956 Land Act, identified the left bank of the river Ter as the city's prin-

cipal green area, and is the legal instrument that justified the expropriation of the old riverside horticultural areas and their subsequent development. In Terrassa, the *Plan General de Ordenación Urbana* of 1951, very much based on an early draft of the 1956 Land Act, provided for 7.5 m<sup>2</sup> of green space per capita, largely concentrated in the Vallparadís parkway project — which, although not yet adopted definitively, remained a proposal in latter urban plans.

In the case of Lleida, the *Plan General de Ordenación Urbana* of 1952-1958, although adhering to the provisions of the Act with respect to green spaces, did not consider the Segre riverbanks as a potential reserve for such spaces. Not until the *Plan General Municipal de Ordenación Urbana* of 1979-1995 was passed were new green spaces designated in the city — among them, the linear-shaped park of the Segre — in accordance with the provisions of the reformed 1975 Land Act. The case of Lleida is similar to that of Sant Adrià de Besòs — albeit that in this latter case we are dealing with an example of metropolitan planning. Here, while much of the historical planning provides for the designation of green spaces, it was not until the *Plan General Metropolitano* of 1976 was passed that the banks of the Besòs were incorporated into the system of urban parks and gardens. This step took its inspiration from the reformed 1975 Land Act. In short, the teams of experts that drew up these plans saw the urban riverbanks as ideal spaces for creating new green zones in order to comply with prevailing land use legislation.

## V. CONCLUSIONS AND CLOSING REMARKS

Our research, which has focused on four river cities in Catalonia (Manlleu, Terrassa, Lleida and Sant Adrià de Besòs), concludes that the advances made in Spanish urban legislation during the 1950s and '60s had a highly significant impact on the management of the country's urban river spaces. This conclusion, we believe, can be extrapolated to most of Spain's river cities that during this period developed similar management plans of their urban river spaces. In this respect, the passing of the first Land Act in 1956 (and its later reform in 1975) marks a highpoint in the planning of Spanish river cities, since this act was the main legal instrument providing for the creation of green spaces along the river banks of Spain's cities.

However, a common feature characterises all the cases analysed here: without exception, we observe a

marked loss of agricultural spaces since the 1950s. This loss can be linked directly to the increase in urbanized spaces and the new communication infrastructures that have been built, but also — as we have seen throughout this study — to the increase in green spaces. The former agricultural spaces — essentially riverside orchards, legal or otherwise — have been subject to a progressive transformation into urbanized and green areas as they have been gradually incorporated into the urban system and open spaces established by local planning instruments. The historical decline in agricultural activity along the cities' riverbanks also represents a regression of the val-

ues of these water landscapes. This process, above and beyond any considerations that might be made at the local level, is indicative of the changes to the urban model that are occurring globally (above all since the 1950s): urban planning has begun to take into account projects of "renaturalisation" but at the expense of the values that govern the agricultural world. This line of research needs to be explored further to determine whether it is a generalizable process at the Spanish level, while it is essential to examine in greater depth current regeneration proposals that find great socioeconomic possibilities in urban agriculture linked to sustainability.