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Urban development of a bourgeois port city (Santander, 1750-1941)

In the mid-nineteenth century, the Spanish urban system had a relatively dense network of cities, localities with over 10,000 inhabitants, although most of them were small. In 1857, there were 99 cities in Spain of this size around the country, with less than 2.5 million people, approximately 16% of the Spanish population. At that time, Santander, with an official population of 24,702 and an actual population of 28,907, occupied a prominent place in the urban hierarchy, in particular among the provincial capitals. With the exception of La Coruña (27,354 inhabitants), it was the largest city in the coastal regions of the Cantabrian sea (Bilbao had 17,649 inhabitants; Oviedo 14,156 and Gijón 10,378). This was a very different from the situation that had existed just over one hundred years previously, since at the beginning of the eighteenth century Santander was nothing more than a small fishing village on the Cantabrian coast.

How and why did this rapid and profound transformation take place? This research does not require a different response to this question than the ones already provided by numerous authors from different areas of knowledge. Our purpose now is to analyse and interpret the impact that such spectacular changes had on the morphological and structural configuration of the urban space and unravel how the town, which was a medieval fishing village even in the first half of the eighteenth century, became the bourgeois, industrial and seaside resort city that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century.

The most suitable way to approach this subject is to use the classic methods from geohistoric research, bibliographic and documentary sources, contemporary news-

papers, literary works, descriptions of travellers, etc. However, in this case we have used graphic images, old cartography and photography, two types of documents that are complementary and, in my opinion, inseparable as essential resources for understanding building types, urban morphology and structure, as well as historical landscapes. Therefore, graphic sources, particularly photography, have not been used here only as mere illustrations, but as a basic resource for understanding and explaining the historical city from a dynamic perspective, as visual documentation for the analysis and transmission of knowledge of the urban space.

The first known settlement of what is now the city of Santander dates back to the 1st century AD and seems to have consisted of a small population located on the Somorrostro hill. At its feet was the *Portus Victoriae Iulio-brigensium* located at the mouth of the Becedo creek, which was a small and precarious coastal refuge. This primitive Roman nucleus was the precursor of the medieval *Puebla Vieja*, a group of houses built around an abbey and the entrance road to the city. The primitive village soon established commercial relations with numerous ports in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. Economic growth generated the increase in population and the area it covered with the construction of a new district on the other side of the estuary, the *Puebla Nueva*, linked to the original nucleus by a wooden bridge that was built at the end of the 12th century.

The town of medieval origin survived with few changes until the mid-eighteenth century, when a series of circumstances coincided that provided unprecedented

opportunities and generated extraordinary growth that eventually led to the replacement of the quiet fishing village with a thriving bourgeois port city.

One of the first signs of the change was its approval as the seat of the diocese of Santander in 1754. It was granted city status the following year, but the main drivers of change were socioeconomic. In 1751, the city was authorized to trade with the Antilles, a prerogative ratified in 1765 by the Decree that liberalized trade with America. All of these events made Santander the main port of departure for Castilian agricultural products.

With a similar goal, construction began on the Camino Real of Reinosa to Santander through the valley of Besaya, a road infrastructure that decisively contributed to economic revitalization by improving the connection between Santander and the main centres of the Castilian interior and, consequently, also extended the area of influence of the Santander port. A century later, improved access from and to Castile was completed with the construction of another infrastructure for a new means of transport and communication, the railway, which, in principle, had a similar objective to the Camino Real, to connect the Canal of Castile with the port of Santander.

Santander's economic activity evolved in parallel to port jobs in terms of trade development, the installation of workshops and consumer goods industries and the provision of public and private services.

Together with these socioeconomic factors, it is necessary to highlight the indirect impact that its designation as a capital city had. This led to a concentration of political-administrative functions in Santander, similar to other Spanish capitals. Another activity that promoted rapid development and had a fundamental influence on the urban dynamics was summer recreational and spa tourism.

These economic changes immediately resulted in a considerable increase in the urban population, which was partly due to natural growth and, above all, to a very positive migration flow. Santander therefore went from being a small fishing village at the beginning of the eighteenth century to being listed, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, as a medium-large Spanish port and industrial city. The urban changes were reflected in the urban transformation of the city.

In the case of Santander, as in other cities and Cantabrian villages, there was a strict link between urban growth and changes in the port. This meant that, from very early on, all urban transformation projects stemmed from the modification and expansion of port facilities, in particular the docks, to the extent that the port can be

considered a driving force of change and an element that defines the urban structure of Santander, as has been previously stated on a number of occasions. It is not an overstatement to say that, at least until the end of the nineteenth century, urban dynamics and morphology have been directly linked to the development of the port and, later, to the construction of railway infrastructures.

The network formed by the tracks and the two railway stations, which were near each other but independent, and also close to the docks, created a port-rail area that closed off the traditional city to the south-west creating a practically insurmountable barrier, which had a very negative impact from an urban perspective, as we will explain later.

The limited expansion of the medieval urban space was done by infilling the inland port, the *Dársena Chica* or *La Ribera* located on the estuary of the *Becedo* stream. This was done for health reasons, but also for urban planning purposes since it formed the basis for the layout of the central area and has acted as the main axis of the city up to the present.

Even before significant changes were made to the original urban space, the city began expanding towards the east contiguously. At the beginning of the second half of the eighteenth century, in 1766, expansion began on land reclaimed from the sea by infilling and earthmoving. It was based on a project for remodelling and improving the port that had been developed by the military engineer Francisco Llovet.

Parallel to this process of urban expansion to the east, another spatial redistribution of the popular classes took place. This mostly involved workers, fishermen and sailors from the *Cabildo de Abajo* district, who had been displaced by the successive landfills and building and had therefore occupied this space near the fishing port and the factories located on the outskirts of this new urban area. As it grew eastward, the planned "bourgeois" city pushed some of the economic activities and working people out into areas that were increasingly further from the centre.

Unlike the expansion to the east, which began early and was the result of numerous consecutive projects and plans, expansion to the west took place without any planning, despite the fact that it was precisely the only sector that had a general urban development plan in the mid-nineteenth century. The new neighbourhood was intended from the start for residential purposes to accommodate the middle and working classes, and it also had a large number of factories.

Special mention should be given to the area known as "*Ensanche de Maliaño*", another urban space that was

extended by infilling the sandbanks that stretched across the foot of the southern slope of the Somorrostro hill, from the Las Naos pier to the Raos estuary. In fact, until the end of the nineteenth century, this work only resulted in the partial conditioning of the land for rail access to the city, the construction of stations and the urbanization of the easternmost area. Several streets acted as a link with the historic city. The main avenues were not structurally or morphologically integrated into the larger *Ensanche de Maliaño* area, but were more of an extension of the southwestern sector of the consolidated historical city.

An incident that had the largest negative impact on this new urban fabric was the catastrophe caused by the explosion of the steamboat *Cabo Machichaco*, which occurred on 3 November 1893. The “tragedy of Machichaco”, in addition to causing almost six hundred deaths, almost completely destroyed two of the main streets on the headwaters of the “*Ensanche*” and damaged over one hundred buildings. The entire area remained relatively isolated until work began after 1936. This included the demolition of the railway stations and their relocation and unification, and the opening of the tunnel under the Somorrostro hill, the current *Pasaje de Peña*.

Modest development of the spa area of *El Sardinero* began in the first half of the nineteenth century. However, both activities and territorial development were completed quickly. Although this space was already parcelled and previously occupied, the true colonization project came from the Society for the Promotion of Local Interests and the Society of Friends of *El Sardinero* (1915) and was part of the “Expansion Plan of the city towards the North-east and East” of 1925, which also included the neighbourhoods of *Tetuán-San Martín*, *Miranda* and *Menéndez Pelayo*. Built between 1912 and 1914, the avenue of *Reina Victoria*, an elevated road over much of the northern arch of the bay following the trend of the French Riviera *corniches*, was the first direct link between the historic quarter of Santander and its eastern extensions with *El Sardinero*, as an extension of the main urban axis between *Cuatro Caminos* and *Puertochico*.

The construction of Santander as a “bourgeois” city was completed with a large number of infrastructures and service facilities that modernized and adapted the city to the tastes and interests of the bourgeoisie and the upper middle classes.

The results of this study are in line with findings from similar previous works, both on an individual and general scale. Urban and urbanistic transitions can be understood as part of a general process that took place in European cities, in particular port cities. They share many common

denominators, although the timing and the pace were different.

In almost all cases, the causal factors of development were not so related to the initial size and function, but to economic dynamics, specifically to the emergence of activities related to colonial trade. The new means of travel and transport, the railway and steamboats, greatly contributed to consolidating these processes. Based on this idea, which is almost unanimously accepted, we can also use the case of Santander to conclude that socioeconomic agents were determining factors in urban and urbanistic dynamics, in population growth and in the expansion and reorganization of urban spaces. However, the complementary development of industrial activities, seasonal tourism and public and private services, linked to its status as a capital, helped it overcome the port trade crisis of the late nineteenth century.

It is also important to note the extraordinary impact that transport, road and terminal infrastructures had, although this must be observed from several perspectives, focusing not only on the population and socioeconomic evolution of the city, but also on the urban influence they had on the morphological and functional structure of the urban space. In this sense, the case of Santander is a magnificent example that shows how, despite their positive economic effect, these infrastructures, especially railways, had a contradictory effect on urban development. Thus, if a space was provided for a track entering the city, for the station and its connection with the port, and this stimulated the expansion project on the western coast, the rail network built at the port itself prevented the residential urbanization of the new urban land for almost a century, until its connection with the rest of the city was partially resolved.

Conversely, the network of urban railways or trams improved connectivity between the new urban areas, the centre and the hubs of the activity by promoting the transfer of freight and intermodality between the port and railway stations. This also enabled the creation and expansion of new peripheral, suburban and peri-urban neighbourhoods where industrial activities (*Astillero* and *Maliaño*) had been set up and provided jobs for many inhabitants of the consolidated city, or where tourism activities took place.

The urban transition process could also be seen in a greater diversification of the urban landscape. Without the need to go into detail, it is important to note the existence of a large number of well-differentiated landscapes: the coastal urban façade and the bourgeois neighbourhoods of the successive eastern expansions, the institutional ur-

ban centre, leisure and recreational spaces, suburban and peri-urban working quarters, etc. These were added on to the sectors of the historic, degraded and remodelled town, which completely disappeared in the fire of 1941. In contrast, the urban landscapes developed during the urban transition stage, which are precisely those that are valued the most in relation to the current social and aesthetic identity of the city, have survived until today, with some modifications.

However, these are not fossilized urban landscapes. They have continued to undergo some significant trans-

formations, despite the lack of specific protection. On the other hand, the reconstruction of the centre after the fire, despite the important architectural, morphological and even topographic changes made, tended to consolidate the bourgeois central areas by generating a space that completely excluded the working classes and that was reserved for residential and service activities of the upper classes. Thus, not only the centrality of the main linear axis of the city was maintained, but also the segregated zoning that was laid out during the historical era covered in this work.