

SERGIO TOMÉ FERNÁNDEZ

Departamento de Geografía de la Universidad de Oviedo

Regenerating Neighbourhoods in the Basque Country: Geographical Aspects

I. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

We view urban regeneration as a core instrument for solving the problems of cities as a whole. It could, therefore, be the most appropriate response to Spain's obsolescent lower-class neighbourhoods that were built in the mid-twentieth century by the state and the private sector. For geographers, the most interesting aspect of urban regeneration is not the improvement of buildings and housing — which is much needed due to their basic character and state of deterioration. Our research tends to focus on other aspects of urban liveability: public spaces, mobility, green areas, socialisation and the local economy. A review of the publications on these aspects of urban development, focused on Europe, shows that there are different perspectives in terms of approach. They tend to place greater emphasis on social, morphological and economic aspects — depending on the scientific discipline. There are numerous Spanish research publications on the subject. However, they do not cover the whole country and tend to be sectoral in nature, given that they are usually oriented towards architecture and habitat. There is a lack of local and regional analyses focused on the joint observation of the urban environment in these neighbourhoods, and diagnoses of their shortcomings.

Here, in response to this need, we study 45 disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the Basque region — one of the most socially developed in the country. The goal is to assess the results of urban regeneration (environmental, morphological and functional). It also seeks to determine

the influence of regional and local factors in the design of solutions to local problems, and looks at the success or failure of these solutions. The urban areas studied were selected using data from the Basque Statistics Institute (Eustat) and the National Statistics Institute (INE), from 2017 to 2020. These data relate to income, housing characteristics, and multiple indicators that are used to draw up a Map of Vulnerable Areas within the region. 28 of these districts are located in the provincial capital cities (Bilbao, Vitoria, San Sebastian); the rest are scattered around the region. All these neighbourhoods are classed as being at least relatively vulnerable. However, there is a considerable gap between them in terms of inhabitant income: the poorest earn less than 10,000 euros a year, whilst the best-off earn more than 15,000 euros. We can therefore state that the threshold of separation between the two groups is 13,000 euros.

For the most part, they are districts created in the middle part of the 20th century, and they have different morphologies. Among them are *Fordist* estates that follow the open planning model. But there are also areas of compact buildings and relatively marginal public housing clusters. Its inhabitants include many immigrants from other parts of Spain who arrived in the past, as well as foreigners who arrived more recently. The research required a huge effort to compile dispersed data. This was due to the large number of urban areas analysed and their different scales: some have over 20,000 inhabitants. The methodology prioritised fieldwork and on-site observation. Statistics, urban planning documentation and planning materials were also used, as well as published works

and information reported in the Press. The aim was to understand the regional experience by comparing local experiences of regeneration and sustainable urban development. And the aim was to help improve the methodology used elsewhere in the country.

II. REGIONAL AND LOCAL INTERVENTION INSTRUMENTS

In the Basque Country, Integrated Rehabilitation Areas (ARIs) have been declared since the 1980s, and Deteriorated Residential Areas (ARDs) since the 1990s. The investments made in them are mainly for housing, but also for infrastructure, equipment and economic activities. This line of activity has been strengthened thanks to the European Urban Programme. Since 2015, the regional government has set a goal of Comprehensive Urban Regeneration — understood as joint action, including social needs.

At a lower administrative, urban level, there are Special Plans that have promoted improvements to state housing developments. At the lowest level, city councils approve neighbourhood plans, municipal urban regeneration programmes and strategic plans or agendas. They tend to work on public spaces, the environment, transport and the local economy. In addition, since 2011, district councils, neighbourhood associations and social movements have contributed directly to the transforming of neighbourhoods with ideas and proposals. Public participation has been aimed in part at achieving improvements that reduce the risk of gender-based violence, as indicated on Dark Spot Maps (isolated, inhospitable areas).

III. MORPHOLOGICAL, ENVIRONMENTAL AND URBAN DESIGN RESULTS

Large-scale demolitions have only been carried out where this is structural damage, in deteriorated areas of the historic city and precarious settlements — especially on the outskirts of Bilbao. The most frequent improvement is the creation of new public peripheral or interior spaces, taking advantage of sloped areas, the interior of blocks of houses, and the roofs of underground car parks. Many pre-existing squares have been enlarged or refurbished to diversify how they are used and make them more attractive — based around the concept of the “heart of the neighbourhood”. Streets

are often pedestrianised and traffic calming measures implemented, sometimes forming a main thoroughfare through the area (although almost never providing wider pedestrian routes).

Steep slopes in areas of Guipúzcoa and Vizcaya make the issue of accessibility important. This is not solved with escalators but with public lifts, located close to community services, urban transport routes and pedestrian routes. The lack of on-street public parking is exacerbated by the lack of private garages in older buildings. Peripheral surface car parks or indoor car parks need to be built on undeveloped land, in the open air, underground or silo type. With regard to public and sustainable transport, only Vitoria has tram lines in the popular neighbourhoods, and enclosed parking for bicycles. There are many cycle paths and these are also being expanded considerably in the districts of Bilbao and the San Sebastian urban area.

In addition to their sloping topography, parts of the suburbs built between 1940 and 1970 are on the edge of town. This can mean proximity to forests and appealing natural spaces, where it has been easy to create recreational areas and environmentally friendly gardens cultivated by local residents. In order to form neighbourhood gardens, land previously occupied by industry or landfill sites has sometimes been converted. It is more difficult to insert small green areas into residential spaces, except where they have an open construction. In dense areas, the only option is to plant trees in the streets. In narrow streets, the only alternative is to widen the pavements or plant trees between car parking spaces. Using different botanical species is key to improving the landscape. Other relevant environmental measures include communal biomass heating systems and pneumatic waste collection networks, backed by European funding.

IV. ATTRACTING RESIDENTS AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC STIMULATION

To tackle ageing, impoverishment and immigrant apartheid, architecture needs to be refurbished and socially diverse residents need to be attracted. Where possible, new buildings have been added that are at least partly of a higher financial level, in order to attract young people. These groups are also offered the so-called Endowed Accommodation, with shared services for people staying there for fewer than five years. At the same time, the Basque Government facilitates the rental of empty flats in

old buildings, managed through a public company. The conversion of empty commercial premises into housing is permitted — although is still very rare.

In a region with an industrial tradition, conversion and relocation have left a large number of brownfields and derelict buildings. Where they are of cultural interest they are put to public use. Otherwise, they leave space for new usage combinations (housing, tertiary, facilities) — some interesting examples being in Guipúzcoa and Vizcaya. Outside the big cities, it is harder to attract high-tech activities to old industrial buildings. Initiatives to convert working-class neighbourhoods into eco-neighbourhoods are not proving very successful either.

On the other hand, the absence of tertiary activities and the closure of traditional shops are general issues, as the population ages and shopping habits change. This affects food markets, which are in decline or are converted into supermarkets. In order to stimulate the local economy, some local councils subsidise the improvement of unoccupied premises, the opening of new businesses, and the modernisation of existing ones. It is harder to concentrate investment in areas that are of limited interest to companies, to open up free-trade zones or artisan centres. The third sector and the silver economy are expected to gain importance in the coming years.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The sustainable restoration of obsolete neighbourhoods in the Basque Country is highly dependent on public participation and responding to local problems. These include demographic ageing, the coexistence of housing and industry, and the very steep topography (except in the case of Álava). It is usually easier to achieve goals that are exclusively the responsibility of the government: open spaces, facilities, green areas, accessibility, mobility, public housing. In smaller towns and poorer areas, there is an immediate limit to the scope for improvement, unless demolition is done. Positive transformation is much easier in the larger cities, and better-off, more affluent neighbourhoods. In such places, we see an appreciation in terms of values — with the downside being the risk of gentrification. In general, the hardest thing is to gain the interest of the private sector, and attract business investment when the location is not very favourable. This issue is more prevalent for smaller cities — except where they form part of a metropolitan conurbation. There are more small changes than major structural transformations. However, we must trust in the totality of these small actions as they represent a steady advance towards sustainability.