

## *From self-construction to demolition: ruins with no speculative purpose in the renovation process of the city*

### I. INTRODUCTION, OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The city is a space in permanent transformation; the character of its historic buildings, ruins and vacant plots depends on their location, their economic value and their urban and architectural quality, as well as the period in which each part of the urban network was created. When any of these values are lost, the ruinous state may become an added quality, later leading to the transformation of the space in favour of rehabilitation, reform or regeneration processes, which frequently act as a mask for speculative behaviour.

In this study, we contrast, on the one hand, the traditional relationship between the processes of ruin and demolition as a real estate strategy, characteristic of the last third of the twentieth century, and whose cycle has finally closed with new constructions; and on the other, during the first half of the twentieth century, ruins of a permanent nature located in the suburbs with no speculative purpose or expectations of renewal. In these, the process has become fossilised in the first stages, the declaration of ruin and demolition, constituting one of the essential factors of their relative vulnerability within the city.

In order to analyse this problem, a systematic analysis has been carried out of the 304 declarations of ruin approved in the first two decades of this twenty-first century, independently of the current state derived from such a declaration, whether it be a shut-up and walled building, a demolished building, or in some cases, the

self-promotion of a new building for housing. To be more precise, we consulted the files of ruins registered since the year 2000 in two quarters of the city of Valladolid, considered representative due to their peripheral condition and the concentration of buildings declared to be in ruins: the 'Barrio España' and 'Pilarica'. After creating a data matrix in the Municipal Historical Archive (with data concerning the date the buildings were declared to be in ruins, the characteristics of the original building and the reason for being declared a ruin), we consulted the data from the Land Register and from several real estate websites. We then visited each plot concerned to see the situation and to document the current state and the characteristics of the surrounding landscape. All this information has allowed us to identify a part of the city, with a random distribution that we call the 'gruyere city', understood as the sum of empty plots and buildings in ruin that are concentrated, in particular, in the suburbs of the 1950s and 1960s.

In this work, we aim to prove the hypothesis that the occupation of vast amounts of new urban land in the first two decades of the twentieth century (the real estate boom) was accompanied by a process of the unsystematic emptying of some areas of the old city, especially at the edges of the marginal growth of the second half of the twentieth century. This emptying, in some cases, was only of the population and the activity; but in many others, it was an absolute emptying, which involved demolitions and the return of the land to the modest condition of a plot in the urban network.

## II. ABANDONMENT AND RUIN AS ATTRIBUTES OF THE DAILY URBAN LANDSCAPE IN THE OLD QUARTERS OF SPANISH CITIES

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the situation that characterises the processes of buildings' obsolescence and the shortening of their life cycle can be grouped around three situations that have the aim of legalised conservation in common: the declaration of being a ruin without actual demolition, since demolition requires a major works licence; the declaration of a ruin with total or partial demolition, but without rebuilding anew; and finally, the declaration of a ruin with a licence to demolish and to construct a new building. The presence and relative entity of the first two situations, as well as the long period of time in which the old, ruined buildings or the resulting empty plots following demolition remain so, confirms the lack of any systematic processes of speculation, while also converting ruin and abandonment into the determining traits of the daily urban landscape in many neighbourhoods of Spain's cities.

This new urban ruin is characteristic of the residual and degraded areas, sharing attributes that other authors have identified as *terrain vague* or "non-places", or even as "places on the margins". These spaces, which were the basis of some residential or industrial activity, are difficult to incorporate into the urban process and are affected by notable land restoration processes, in which the "green" areas gradually occupy the city in an inverse process to that of its construction; in such places, the real estate market has no capacity to react, as there is hardly any demand for the purchase of housing or buildings of a very low quality, so it must be self-promotion that rescues them from abandonment, closing a secular circle that goes from the self-construction of the first half of the twentieth century to the self-promotion of the first decades of the twenty-first century.

The origin of this fatal destiny for the traditional construction is to be found in the fact that various phenomena coincided. First of all, the construction was of very low quality, making the investment in improvements rather unattractive. When the owners pass away, those who inherit the property are not willing to pay for demolition costs in order to build a new house, given the conditions of the plot of land itself (with only a few metres of façade and not much depth suitable for construction), the planning limitations (possible square metres constructed) and the surrounding conditions (narrow streets with few shops and scarce facilities, as well as other variables that increase the vulnerability of the area,

built in the years of urban optimism of the second half of the twentieth century).

In such conditions, it is relatively simple to reach the state that every legislation defines as economic ruin: that in which the building to be declared as a ruin needs repairs in order to maintain the necessary conditions of safety and habitability, the cost of which represents more than fifty percent of its value, excluding that of the land upon which it is built. Thus, if the plot of land already has a low value, even lower than the value of the house built upon it, thus making the cost of any reform rise above fifty percent of the market value, then the declaration of a building in ruin would proceed. On the other hand, it is relatively frequent that, added to this so-called economic ruin, we can also have an urban ruin, either because the building is outside urban planning strategies, or because, as has traditionally been the case, there exists a *patent unworthiness* with respect to the area (block, street, neighbourhood) in which the building is situated.

## III. THE GRUYERE CITY: THE PERSISTENT RUIN IN THE TWO QUARTERS OF THE CITY OF VALLADOLID

The declaration of buildings in a city as ruinous is an unsystematic process, brought about by the presence of a serious alteration in the formal or technical attributes of buildings or as a result of the shortening of a building's useful life, when the expected profitability is higher than the satisfaction that its use entails. This second process has historically been dominant, linking ruins to an almost immediate rebuilding when the social and economic circumstances permitted.

However, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, this historical association between ruin, demolition and rebuilding has been broken. It is clear to see that very few of the more than three hundred consulted cases of ruins have been rebuilt; most of them remain closed and shored up and, at least in appearance, outside the real estate market. In addition, when they have been demolished, the plots of land remain empty despite being advertised for sale in the estate agencies or on the street itself.

In the city of Valladolid, this process is characteristic of the self-construction quarters that arose during the twentieth century on the edge of the city: 'Las Delicias', 'Pilarica', 'Pajarillos Altos', 'Cuesta de la Maruquesa', 'La Farola', 'Barrio España', 'Cañada de Puente Duero', 'Belén', 'Las Flores', 'Parva de la Ría', 'Barco de San Vicente', 'La Bombilla' or 'Buenos Aires'.

All of these quarters make up a kind of belt of squalor with buildings of a very low construction quality, in addition to a chaotic structure of plots with a large number of plots and wasteland that remain empty for years, thus evidencing the weak link of this singular type of urban fabric with real estate speculation, typical of other times and other areas of the city. There is a considerable number of buildings declared to be in ruin in the quarters of 'Pajarillos', 'Delicias' or 'La Farola', but where this phenomenon acquires highly relevant dimensions is in the quarters of 'Pilarica' (the year 1900) and 'Barrio España' (the year 1931). This is because, in recent decades, multiple initiatives declaring properties to be in ruin have coincided with an increase in the plots of land which have been abandoned.

Apart from the notable differences in origin and evolution, both quarters share the same problem, that of the division of space, as they are situated far from the city centre, and furthermore being separated from it by notable barriers, the railway line and the River Esgueva, which at the time decreased both the interest in and urban value of the rustic properties on the edges of the urban land. All of these quarters arose and grew up without regulation or basic infrastructures and are occupied by workers in the new industries and in construction, being mostly immigrants from other parts of the Province of Valladolid or from the neighbouring provinces of the region of Castile & León.

The first of these quarters, that of 'Pilarica', whose origins go back to the end of the nineteenth century, is a small quarter situated to the East of the city, separated from it by the railway line. It experienced a strong growth in the 1950s and 1960s, maintaining the typological characteristics of the original nucleus, that is, single storey buildings, self-constructed using low quality materials. In the 1970s, this quarter was extended and rejuvenated, yet still without a systematic plan to transform the original buildings and plots. Thus, in 1977, there were already more than 60 uninhabited single storey houses with small back yards that were part of the original nucleus.

Between 2000 and 2018, 16 files for ruin were approved, of which 14 corresponded to single storey houses. To those must be added, according to the Land Register, another 43 plots not built on, of the 190 in existence in the quarter's nucleus. Faced with the little interest shown by private initiatives, the empty plots resulting from the demolition of buildings remained so for many years. Most of the files were initiated following the fall of elements upon the street or upon the next-door property, with the collapse of walls and roof and an important ac-

cumulation of vegetation. A real focal point of insanitary conditions accompanied the risk to the public streets and the adjacent properties.

Due to this high degree of disinterest and deterioration, fifteen of the sixteen houses declared to be in ruin between 2000 and 2018 had been demolished by 2021; only one of them was still occupied by its owners after being reformed, repairing the roof and reinforcing the walls. Five plots have been rebuilt in accordance with the conditions set out in the "Plan General de Ordenación Urbana" or 'PGOU' (General Urban Regulation Plan) in force at that time. What is more relevant, however, and which confirms our initial hypothesis, is that 62.5% of the buildings declared to be in ruin have been demolished and the plots have remained empty.

The second quarter analysed, the 'Barrio España', shares some similarities with the quarter of 'Pilarica' concerning its original peripheral location. Their evolution over the last century has been decidedly unequal, since the latter evolved towards a greater formal integration, while the 'Barrio España', which was originally manifestly illegal, has maintained and even increased some of its original attributes of marginality and vulnerability, to the point where it can be considered one of the most "indisciplined" spaces in the city, in both an urban and morphological sense. There are many streets with no exit and cul-de-sacs, empty plots surrounded by walls, ruinous houses, some abandoned and others inhabited, both legally and illegally, as well as some vegetable gardens and yards with livestock.

Despite its reduced dimensions, this quarter, which has just over 2,600 inhabitants in 2021, gives an impression of abandonment and is a good example of one of the characteristic forms of growth of Spanish cities: the suburb. It has a spontaneous and legally confused origin; the pioneers, generally immigrants from rural areas recently arrived in the city or residents from the overcrowded centre, faced with the economic difficulties of the time, invade some properties situated in a singular emplacement, between the River Pisuegra, the River Esgueva and the old road to Santander, that is, where urban regulations and municipal control did not reach.

The information contained in the analysed files of ruin confirms all the singularities of the quarter; in sixteen of the cases, the houses were of a single storey of which their year of construction was mostly unknown, but was probably around the year 1940. The application to be considered a ruin mostly concerned the collapse of parts of the buildings and the danger of total collapse. The situation of deterioration is such that one of the fi-

les has the following description: “the remains of what was once a house (...) at risk of total collapse at any moment”. According to the story of neighbours detailed in another file: “the house is falling down bit by bit”. In several cases, the accumulation of rubbish, vegetation, furniture and even abandoned vehicles is reported, with the consequent presence of rats and bad smells, supported by the appreciation of one of the technicians who visited one of the ruinous buildings: “the accumulation of rubbish and the uncontrolled growth of vegetation means there is a real risk of fire”.

Sixteen properties of the seventeen analysed were found to be unoccupied and completely abandoned; in two cases, they were illegally occupied by homeless people. Only one house had legal residents, and they were in a situation of complete precariousness, struggling to live in rented accommodation of 13 m<sup>2</sup>. Of the plots that had filed for ruin between the years 2000 and 2018, 65% remained empty and abandoned; some were covered by vegetation, giving rise to unhealthy spaces. The recent declaration as ruins could be considered as the reason for remaining empty, yet five of the empty ruins had been declared so before 2010, so the motive for being declared ruinous is far from those of speculative pretensions.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

Sometimes, the simplest facts are put together within complex categories, thus becoming hidden and masked. This occurs with all those events in which the declaration of being a ruin in any of its legal categories is involved, as it constitutes the final cycle of the useful life of a building due to the fatigue of the extremely poor materials used to construct them. As long as there has been, in its genesis, no speculative purpose and its end has not been forced due to this fact, it can usually be linked to the logic of the spontaneous transformation of the city.

In a sense, a part of the city that was spontaneously created is also disappearing spontaneously, as has been shown to be the case. There exists no strategy for collec-

tive action, it happens from building to building, with no urban-spatial logic; it even happens through the fatigue of the materials, suddenly, with no time to take preventive measures.

Unlike what happens in the city centre, the buildings in a state of ruin in the suburbs remain that way for many years. The state of ruin can be prolonged for over a decade, ending finally in the demolition of the property, following either reports from citizens or through the intervention of the city police.

The research carried out into the files of ruins in the quarters of Valladolid has allowed us to perceive the relationship between both processes (ruin and new construction), since the very bad quality of the construction materials of many of the old suburbs advises against the conservation of parts of such buildings, despite their being witnesses to a time in which necessity, urgency and indiscipline were the city's urban characteristics.

The evident vulnerability of the origin of this singular and fragile model of traditional domestic architecture has continued for decades and has inexorably resulted, as if we were seeing a programmed obsolescence, in a declaration of ruin that has social and material stigmas attached: the abandonment of the residents (almost in flight from the quarter), ignorance of ownership, the impossibility of repair due to economic ruin, illegal occupation, spontaneous collapse or burning of the building, the persistence of the condition of empty plot, or even the wish to sell without being able to prove ownership with title deeds.

In order to make such a dissociation even more notorious, the hypothesis we first articulated at the beginning of this article, a clear deterioration of the entire set of quarters can be added to the above. Being in a state of ruin does not necessarily involve speculation or the renovation of the urban fabric; while the persistence and spatial concentration of these situations contribute to the degradation of the urban landscape, in particular, making the recuperation of the urban values it had in its origins irreversible without a profound institutional intervention.