

CARLOS EMILIO RELEA FERNÁNDEZ

Universidad de León

## *The Historic Core of León in the Face of New Times*

Since the 19th-century cities have been growing and developing on their own, an evolution which is broken by the growth caused by industrialisation, which is widespread in the 20th century. The processes of urban transformation in Spain are especially important from the middle of the twentieth century, years in which there is a significant physical expansion not only at the urban and morphological level but also at the demographic and functional one, although the city “continues pouring from what we can identify as a traditional city”. If an area of our cities is especially sensitive to changes, that is the historic centre, a unique place occupied for hundreds or thousands of years and where the monumental landmarks are, where the “soul” of the city itself rests. These iconic places, different from the modern and repetitive residential neighbourhoods which surround them, and which exceed 2,000 years of uninterrupted occupation in our region in some cases, are the ones that differentiate one city from another. But these spaces, as geographical entities, have the characteristic of being very different in scale, which depends on the population nucleus in which it is inserted and causes them not to be comparable: “26 hectares of extension in Vitoria, 400 in Seville; 11,000 inhabitants in Orense or Pamplona compared to 118,000 in Barcelona” with the particularity which “our interest in conservation is very recent and can only be understood from the destruction” in our historical background.

The modifications suffered by this traditional model of complex neighbourhood par excellence are due to its new role of reference space subjected to a strong “elitist” commodification of heritage. This new market, in

turn, responds to a new real estate activity promoted by capital and which associates the residential development with the return to the traditional centre, —no more periphery!—, with new forms of life, and new social and economic behaviours protected by the fact that these urban spaces are no longer just spaces with historical and cultural value which maintain the identity of the place, but they are a new resource of development in themselves.

The old towns are still living neighbourhoods, more complex than other adjacent areas, and are subject to an important process of commodification in recent decades. In a search for a more favourable position in the regional, national or global urban network, which seeks to attract investment and tourists associated with competitiveness strategies, it is about a question of promoting the different one, the singular and original one, by using their icons as advertising claims, which is easily contrasted when we see advertising in which the skyline of our cities is observed, although the opposite often occurs with the repetition of the same elements (street lamps, street furniture, bronze statues and treatment and materials used in the remodelling of public spaces) which lead to the musealization of these neighbourhoods.

But out of questions of the patrimonial, cultural, urban or demographic type, there is an interest to analyse the problems which affect the old towns in direct relation to the functional changes derived from the increase of the tourist activity and its synergies from different disciplines, as well as the valuation and defence of the public space in these singular areas.

In the following pages of this article, the reality of the Historic Centre of the city of León is analysed without more pretension than that of offering a current vision of part of the problem which affects this significant part of the city by focusing on the notable process of tertiary education, especially in the tourist activities, and the processes of social response against the urban actions in this historical space.

#### LEÓN OLD TOWN OF: CHARACTERISTICS AND CHALLENGES

The historic centre is in a strategic enclave for the Roman founders of the city, at the interface of the rivers Bernesga and Torío. The traces of the Roman origin of the city are still visible (the perimeter wall and the main axes of the original Roman camp, the *cardo* (350 m long) and the *decumanus* (570 m) to a lesser extent.

During the Middle Ages, the city spent a century unpopulated, but the city is reborn and becomes *urbs regia* in the 11th century with the distance from the border. The period of splendour of the Leonese monarchy begins, which also leaves its mark on the urban plane in the form of squares and historical, religious, and civil buildings.

The arrival of the railway in 1863 marked the end of the stagnation of the previous centuries and the beginning of the important morphological and functional changes in the city with its expansion to the west, where the new railway station was located. Until the approval of the *Ensanche* plan in 1904 the city barely grew physically. After this date, the functional centre was moved from the old part of the city to the new bourgeois city. The historic neighbourhood did not go into recession until the 20th century.

During this phase of great expansion, it took place the disappearance of important patrimonial elements of the city affected the wall while the suburbs entered clear decay or were abandoned to their fate to remain in ruins to be demolished and rebuilt or converted into equipment, soon after. During these years, destruction is imposed on the construction in the old town.

But in 1994, the year in which the Special Plan for the Planning, Improvement and Protection of the Ancient City of León (PEOMPCA) was definitively approved, the situation experienced a new era. The problem of pedestrianisation, the processes of urban renewal and the improvement of equipment through public funding, facadism and homogenisation are caused by using standardised materials and models. But not everything was

pickaxe and ruin, it also recovered a considerable number of noble buildings converted into museums or administrative headquarters (the palace and museum of Count Luna or the *Casona de Puerta Castillo*).

In the specific case of León, we have some particular issues which play an important role in its current situation, such as the process of tourism, the transformation of a part of this singular urban space in which both positive effects, such as the tourist value of the old town, as negative, as the tertiarisation which significantly reduces the residential function of the historic centre appear. This process was also provoked by a notable strengthening of its cultural function thanks to the expansion of its offer with the opening of numerous museums in recent decades and which are in much of the rehabilitated heritage of the ancient city. These are the cases of the Museum of León, in the Pallarés building, the León Romano interpretation centre, in the Puerta Castillo House, the Gaudí Museum in the Botines House, the interpretation centre of the Kingdom of León, the Sierra Pambley or the Egyptian Lyceum. All of them, along with the rest of the museums, cathedrals and San Isidoro, and the many monuments and architectural jewels of the city make converge an important collection of cultural elements able to guarantee the local and foreign demand for this type of space in this area. However, this substantial number of cultural facilities in the historic quarter, belonging to a unitary and identity space, suffers from a treatment or offer planned in a global and coordinated manner.

In front of the constant visit to some museums other unknown ones show up and with a smaller number of visits due to the existence of an important hierarchy of what can be called axes and dominant sub-axes of pedestrian traffic. most of the visitors, especially the foreign ones, have very marked axes of displacement, mainly in the one which corresponds to the Calle Ancha, which connects Plaza de Regla and the cathedral to Plaza de Santo Domingo, and which has continued by Gran Vía de San Marcos, out of the historic centre, before reaching San Marcos and the MUSAC. This is undoubtedly the main dominant axis of the tourist-cultural flows of the city. From this axis, we see how other minor axes which connect to other cultural points fork, both north and southbound, but they are strongly associated with the remarkable hospitality activity implanted in the area (Barrio Húmedo in the south and Barrio Romántico in the north).

This prominent linearity in travel means that much of the historic quarter is overflowing and saturated with tourists and passers-by daily while other parts remain

“forgotten”, alien to the public: these are the cases of the neighbourhood of Santa Marina, northbound and the surroundings of Puerta Moneda to the south and eastbound. But the most important problem facing the old town of León is the metastasis of the hotel area, especially in its main area. The large presence of bars and restaurants has led to the disappearance of traditional commerce and its mono specialisation in this type of activity.

In addition, two issues related to the architectural heritage of the city must be considered. The first of these refers to the so-called “kidnapped” heritage, a concept which, in this case, refers to the appropriation of heritage by institutions or the civilian population and which must be seen as a secular occupation of public elements in response to architectural use, as an economy of space, throughout the very creation of the city in times when there was neither sensitivity nor concern for the preservation of the inherited historical heritage existing today. For this reason, it cannot be said that there was an intention to take away what we understand as public property now, even though that has been the case today, access to these elements and the processes of public intervention on them become difficult but not impossible. The other mentions the Camino de Santiago as it passes through the city. Its declaration as a Historic Site (in 1999) and its buffer of protection in urban land which, does not have a Special Municipal Protection Plan for this historic site which the law requires to this day yet, which translates into a more than notable delay in granting the necessary licenses for any type of action in this area which in turn causes the withdrawal of the investment so necessary in some areas such as the surroundings of the Plaza del Grano and Puerta Moneda.

#### FUNCTIONAL CHANGES TOWARDS PRODUCTIVE SPECIALISATION

Despite having lost the quality of the urban centre, its central location in the middle of the urban centre causes it to be crossed by a large part of the population daily, while the road traffic surrounds it by some streets with high traffic since the prohibition to circulate through its streets was approved in the 90s of the last century. In the intramural space, perfectly divided in two by Ancha Street, there are two completely different worlds: the Levitical city upstate and the city of leisure and commerce south band. In recent years, this traditional division has been distorted by the advance of the locals dedicated to the restaurant business and bars which following the axes

of the Barrio Romántico have jumped towards the north of the old town. Even so, this northern part of the city is still dominated by the great properties of the Church, both in terms of religious function (cathedral, collegiate church, churches, and convents) and by the educational function represented by an important presence of religious schools. The administrative function is represented by the facilities of the Diputación, or the offices related to the town planning of the town hall. The cultural function has a greater presence thanks to the openings of new museums, and the functions related to tourism and catering (bars, hotels, and restaurants), which have become the economic engine of the neighbourhood. Traditional commerce, once the main economic activity, is less and less present inside the old town, where only a handful of establishments survive.

In this huge change in the historic centre of the city of León, we must not forget the demographic issue. The demographic situation in the area is quite symptomatic, with a process of selective depopulation which has been taking place for decades and which has seen the resident population rise from 10,841 in 1960 to 6,382 in 1981, 5,511 in 1996, 6,791 in 2004 and 4,723 in 2022. The spatial loss of population especially affects the sectors where the hospitality sector is concentrated, which has already crossed the imaginary border of what is popularly known as the Barrio Húmedo.

As previously noted, the old town has lost its functional centrality in favour of the Eixample. The old town cannot absorb more commercial activity due to two circumstances: the commercial premises are already occupied and most of the buildings have their ground floor dedicated to housing, although this fact did not mean the economic or functional death of a neighbourhood, which was a bustling and lively space in the 80s of the last century, as it is evidenced by the presence of a large economic activity with a high degree of economic diversification, which served both the resident population and the rest of the city and region, at a time when tourism was not its main economic engine.

But those businesses dedicated to the sale of fabrics, dresses or footwear, in addition to the numerous hairdressers and drugstores of other times were abandoned by the retirement and cessation of the activity of the owners, and those which survive have been left out of the main commercial circuits of the city despite the application of new commercial practices and modalities based on the principles of relational marketing. It has already been established that protectionist practices are counterproductive, especially in trade for two reasons; the first

is that they promote obsolete trade structures which, and secondly, they prevent the adoption of innovative actions which benefit the consumer. Even so, in medium-sized cities such as the one in which we are, the transformations imposed by the globalizing process do not have the necessary development yet, so it can be said that traditional trade has disappeared due to the great strength of the tradition of places as emblematic as the Plaza Mayor, with its weekly vegetable market, or the market in Plaza del Conde Luna.

Such a concentration of bars and restaurants causes an increase in noise and nuisance at night, which affects the loss of population, except for those who, due to ageing and lack of resources to move to other parts of the city, remain in it. The southern and western parts of the old town, the present Humid and Romantic quarters respectively, have become monoculture spaces specialising in dining and nightlife that occupy much of the public space taking it away from the pedestrian due to the expansion of the terraces of bars and restaurants.

The rise in restaurant and bar activity has been accompanied by a significant increase in hotel activity. The tourism growth, the arrival of high-speed rail to the city and certain gastronomic events such as the declaration of León as the Gastronomic Capital of Spain in 2018, have made this part of the city an attractive issue for tourism. In recent years, this day and night economy tourism has introduced changes in the residential fabric with the opening of different hotel modalities: those focused on a select clientele, such as the “Hotel Camarote” in the street Dámaso Merino or the NH in the Plaza Mayor, or those who offer solutions to pilgrims and travellers at reasonable prices, such as the Globetrotter Urban&Hostel in Paloma street, the Hostel Palacio Real in Rúa or the Hostel León Quartier Jabalquinto in Juan de Arfe street, via monastic lodgings, small hotels, old and new pensions and, as it could not be otherwise in these times, the opening of tourist apartments (Airbnb has 32 accommodations only in this sector in 2022).

#### PUBLIC ACTION IN CONFLICT WITH CITIZEN PARTICIPATION: LA PLAZA DEL GRANO

Urban actions on an urban fabric as complex and sensitive as the historical space of our cities must face technical and aesthetic issues, but also the reluctance which raises excess population. They have sometimes caused projects to be discarded due to this pressure from the neighbourhood. We must not forget that public space is

the main space of urbanism, urban culture, and citizenship at the same time.

In the case of the recovery of the Plaza del Grano, this study focuses on the social response which accompanies it, where two opposing parties appear well represented: representatives of the public and the general interest and the social representatives against how this project is conducted. The dialectic established among the stakeholders often generates conflicts, especially when these transformation processes affect a space “capable of condensing memories, making it an irreplaceable symbolic reference for a certain population”.

The so-called *Plaza del Grano, de Santa María del Camino* or *del Mercado*, any of these three toponyms can be used to refer to this so emblematic space of the city, is one of the best valued and unknown public spaces in the old town of León at the same time. Morphologically it is represented by a trapezoidal area which has an approximate surface of 2,800 m<sup>2</sup> and its location, behind the church that also gives it its name, has been characterised by having much higher slopes than those that it presents today. We could say that this space has been very marginal until recent times since Don Gutierre Street housed several houses of prostitutes at the end of the last century. In addition to this social marginality, the square’s location and appearance also have a notable influence.

The characteristic pavement of the square using the materials of the area, in this case, boulders, was not unique to the city of León at the end of the eighteenth century and during the nineteenth century. If we check the old city pictures, we can contemplate that the entire urban area was paved with the same material, Today, the question is that this pavement is only in this square, which represents a unicum for archaeologists, that is, the only rest of the old pavement of the city.

Over time, the square has been deteriorating, and local authorities began to assess the need for further rehabilitation after the municipality received complaints from numerous residents of the city about the unfortunate state of neglect in which it was. After years of apathy about this situation, the City Council decides to act on the square and two of its surrounding streets, Capilla and Mercado Streets. The works, which affect one of the places and environments most loved by inhabitants of the city, were conducted between 2007 for the first two phases and until mid-2018 for the third. From the idea, a contest was called in 2011 until the completion of the works, an important dialectic took place in the city, which reflected a strong conflict of interests between a part of the population and local authorities.

The main performances, and the most controversial ones, are in the square itself, respecting the presence of the only plant elements of the square. The two poplars next to the fountain were pruned and the roots treated. The replacement of materials and expansion of the perimeter sidewalk according to the current urban regulations were more important, although has a width of more than three meters in its western sector. This “looting” of about 300 m<sup>2</sup> of pavement along with the unjustifiable increase of a budget multiplied by 10 in a period of economic crisis have been some of the criticisms most used by social groups against the works.

In a globalizing world such as the one we are in, it has been tested that one of the responses of societies to this process is the recovery of a reinforced sense of belonging to a particular place, with its history and local customs, on which to base the differentiating fact against this homogenizing process prevailing in all areas of human existence. It is the fact of being or feeling different to value diversity against the tedious homogeneity that is imposed on us. What the citizens' collectives involved in this type of project demand is a new way of doing politics, and governance which takes into account the opinion and assessment of the protests of these social groups against a mere imposition of a part, policy, as has been done traditionally, especially if the target area belongs to the “soul of the city” represented by its historic quarter.

But we also must consider another important concept: the sense of place. Concepts such as spirit, emotional charge, senses, collective memory, etc., possess a high degree of individual subjectivity and belong to a certain collective with common ideas.

Some authors refer to elements which are accepted by populations, or parts of them, that have no references or are contrasted to see if they are real or not, what they call “myths”. Some powerful elements, easily malleable and which do not need certification and which “create, change and forget more easily and respond better to the urgencies of the present” and “like the stones and the roads the myths contribute to creating a city”. But what are these elements that reinforce this mythical image that these collectives defend so much?

In the case of Plaza del Grano presented here as a reference for satisfactory performance and preservation it is taken of the space of the square to the previous “original” rehabilitation in 1989. Another of the myths is its erroneous association with the origin of the pavement of the square to the Middle Ages (late eighteenth century) and finally the allusion to the *verdin* which characterises this public space which alludes to the grass that appears among the boulders and gives it a certain green carpet appearance. The square was cleaned with water every market day, and that would avoid the appearance of grass, which would prevent the free flow of the dirt towards the sink.

The recovery of Plaza del Grano should be a central urban operation, not unique, leading to the revitalisation of the southern part of a historic quarter characterised by a progressive abandonment and depopulation in which “only in its first section (Puerta Moneda and La Rúa) a quarter of the buildings are closed or have been demolished” to point out that the new constructions have such a high price that “leave out low and middle incomes, dominant among traditional residents”.