
Urban order and historical neighbourhoods: the case of El Cabanyal in Valencia

EURAU'12

ABSTRACT. It is very common to hear that the problem of the historical neighbourhoods lays on their own history: they come from different contexts and ages. Yet true, this argument helps the debate about this problematic to stick in a sterile chatter about the new and the ancient, forgetting other issues as important as the above stated. Among these issues there is the fact that the built city is a complex and alive organism that cannot be tackled in a fragmented way. Through the description of a case study, El Cabanyal in Valencia, we will try to show how sometimes the problems of these settlements are not the usually stated by the urban theories, but the nature of the diagnose concluded by theories themselves. We will discuss how a different approach based in very different variables can help us not only to address these problems differently, but also to better understand the urban phenomena.

KEYWORDS. El Cabanyal, Historical City, Urban Theory, Tradition, Innovation

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1. Introduction, aims

It is a commonplace to state that the urban problem of the traditional neighborhoods lays on their own history: they come from different times and contexts. Although there is some truth in this aphorism, to focus the debate on it has contributed to disregard another essential aspect of the dynamics of these sites: the fact that they form, together with the surrounding urban fabrics, a complex and living organism. It is precisely the abandonment of this second point, as important as the first one if not more, what often leads to an aggravation of the initial problematic. The reality of the urban plans conducted in this generic situation, repeated from town to town with very different variables, shows two fundamental lacks: first, the reforms to bond past and present are only undertaken in the historical fabrics; second, the nature of these transformations does not always know how to take advantage of the specificity of these urban contexts.

This work aims to explore the boundaries of this kind of urban situations through a case study: the neighborhood of El Cabanyal in Valencia. It is a representative example of how, under insufficient principles, an urban improvement plan leads to the exactly opposite result: to the neutralization of its special qualities, very often precisely those that turn these sites into livable and valuable places. In order to do so, we will proceed to a brief analysis of its historical formation that will show us how its bonding with the present times requires of more sharp-eyed policies than the current ones. Secondly, we will establish the link between the formation of the public space and the formation of the identity of the neighborhood. Finally, we will argue that studying the historical neighborhoods as evolutionary processes can lead us not only to a better performing in the existing city, but also to a better understanding of the urban phenomena.

2. Diagnosis of the urban planning tools

2.1 Brief approach to the case study

The Historic Site of El Cabanyal-Canyamelar-Cap de França is one of the various enclaves of the metropolitan area of Valencia which in the past used to be independent towns and nowadays are part of its physical and economical fabric. Known as Poble Nou del Mar until its annexation to the central city in 1897, and since then just as El Cabanyal, it currently serves as a connection with the beaches north of the port and forms, together with Nazaret, el Grao and La Malvarrosa, the seafront of the city. Its urban structure retains most of the original features of the late XVIIIth century, upon whose reticular pattern has evolved a set of eclectic architectures. These values made the neighborhood to be considered as Cultural Interest Asset in 1993.

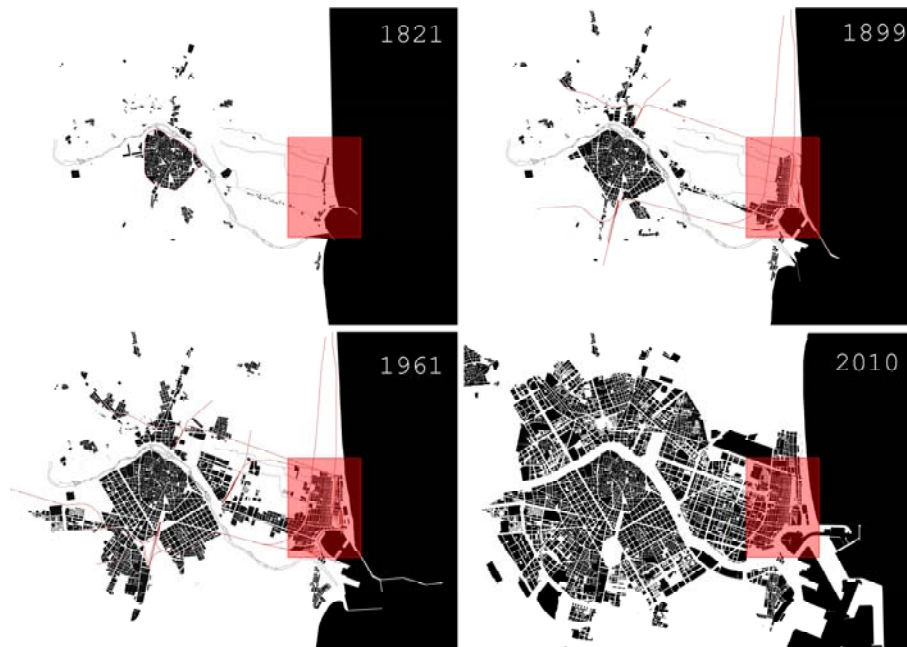


Fig. 1.

The study of its historic evolution reveals that the urban ensemble is representative of a typical land occupation pattern in the valencian coast: a fishermen settlement linked to a fluvial city, this latter being separated from the coast by an expanse of gardens and irrigation ditches, crossed by a few rural connection paths (Fig.1). In its growth, the neighborhood chases the coastline as it moves eastwards due to the port extension works. With the occupation of the successive new grounds, a landscape of rows of "barracas" is progressively set, a growth that will only be interrupted by the limits imposed by the construction of the first railway lines. In 1899, Poble Nou del Mar has already completed its extension, even before than the central city, which has barely pulled down its surrounding wall.

Late in the XIXth century, a new connection between Valencia and Poble Nou del Mar was approved. This new Way, a parallel axis to the historical way to El Grau, received the name of "Way from Valencia to El Cabanyal" and only started to be clearly shaped around 1925. The evolution of this new axis, which is the base for the so called east extension of Valencia, had a very slow development, with many alterations of the original project. In 1961 the radial extension of the city had already been completed, while El Cabanyal had filled al the empty spaces within the railway belt that confined it. In the late 80s, the Avenue of Blasco Ibáñez, which is the current name of the original way, finally reached El Cabanyal.



Fig. 2.

From this moment on, El Cabanyal faces two very concrete problems. The first one, which has a generic nature, is the same affecting all the enclaves of the city that used to be independent towns in the past, which enter a phase of decadence once its self-sufficiency is replaced by the dependency of a richer and more diverse metropolis. The second one has a particular nature and has to do with the policies used by the urban planners to solve its articulation with the city. In 1988, the General Urban Development Plan (GUDP) decided to delegate the solution for this articulation to a new Special Plan which should pick between one of this two options: considering the Avenue of Blasco Ibañez as completed, thus respecting the heritage values of the neighborhood, or enlarging the avenue through the neighborhood in order to achieve a quick access to the beach (Fig.2)

2.2 The solution of the GUDP as an evidence of the insufficiency of the current planning

The position adopted by the GUDP when it reduces a complex urban problem to a simple dilemma has a certain interest for us because it shows two relevant aspects of its nature as a city management tool. The first one is that the choice promoted by the Plan evidences how much the debate between tradition and modernity, characteristic of the architectural thought of the last century, is still unsolved. The second one is that this debate has not been articulated in a creative synthesis through urban planning; instead, it adopts the form of a disjunctive. Since it doesn't seem that this disjunctive lays on the very nature of urban reality but more likely on the theories we use to understand its complexity, it seems logical to ask ourselves three questions.

The first one: What types of processes are behind this approach to reality enhanced by the current urban theories? The second one: Does this kind of approach help us understand the above stated complexity? Finally: Which urban elements remain irreducible to this simple dichotomy and into what extent would their consideration enrich the urban debate and practice?

Regarding the first question, it should be pointed out that, as thought processes, the main urban theories of the last century have more in common than what their opposed considerations on the value of history might suggest. Firstly, their approach to the city is based solely in proposals of formal models, inspired in the authority of the tradition or in the hope of the progress, but always determined beforehand. Secondly, they support a scientific urban approach, although it has a deterministic nature which disregards the existence of exceptions to the rule. Finally, very different models such as Radieuse or Bologna establish an identical reasoning pattern, running from the global to the particular. It seems possible to conclude that from the procedural point of view, these inherited theories can be understood as different attitudes of the very same strategy.

As for the second question, it is possible to reflect on the complexity of the city also from a point of view related to its processes. Thus, the complexity of the cities is based on its nature as a system opened to multiple factors and wills with freedom of action. It seems that the tools of thought detailed in the previous paragraph lead to tackle the problems of the city with less variables than the ones affecting its development, a fact that would explain why the urban reform plans end so frequently in social protests. In this sense, it is convenient to develop a wider understanding of reality, capable to include the dimension of the inhabitant. This would lead to a higher consideration of the importance of the subjective perception in the formulation, resolution and living of the urban space.

Finally, this different approach evidences the wide catalog of existential possibilities changing with the location, what reveals that one of the lacking dimensions in our current urban planning is the consideration of identity. We are referring to an element linked to long-term processes of evolution of the cities, which determines the boundaries of the probable and the impossible and generalizes them through the habit and the habitation. The consideration of identity leads us to a new situation in the evaluation of the environment, where new capacities and categories become available. This new capacity of analysis allows us to obtain a more specific knowledge about reality and about the potentialities of a place through the taking care of its own inhabitants. Among these categories suggested there is a very important one: the public urban space.

3. Study of the formation of the public space of El Cabanyal. Three cases.

Urban public space itself meets several of the dimensions of the urban phenomena: from the permanence and transformations of its physical fabric to the elements that shape it (public road network, private plotting and the buildings that regulate the relationship between ones and others) but also the ways the inhabitants use them as individuals and as members of a bigger system: the urban landscape. On the grounds of the previous explanation, we are going to study three cases of formation of the public space of El Cabanyal, approaching them within the framework of the processes that characterize its specific urban order. The aim will be to contribute to enlighten the necessity of a new and more particularized urban knowledge, sensitive to the mechanism of conformation of the complex and variable order of the city.

3.1 The old center of the neighborhood. Permanence as an added value

The formation of the old center of El Cabanyal is intimately linked to the architectural type used in its construction: the "barraca". It is a popular type of construction, very easy to build, made up with poor and highly inflammable materials. These buildings of reeds and mud were disposed in irregular rows which chased the coastline as it moved eastwards, forming already in 1796 a reasonably consolidated settlement. In this date, a severe fire affected a large amount of the buildings, what motivated the elaboration of a plan for its reconstruction, based in academic grounds. However, the superposition of the states in 1796 and 2012 shows that the reconstruction carried out was guided by other type of principles, which made the structure of property to remain in the evolution of the site.

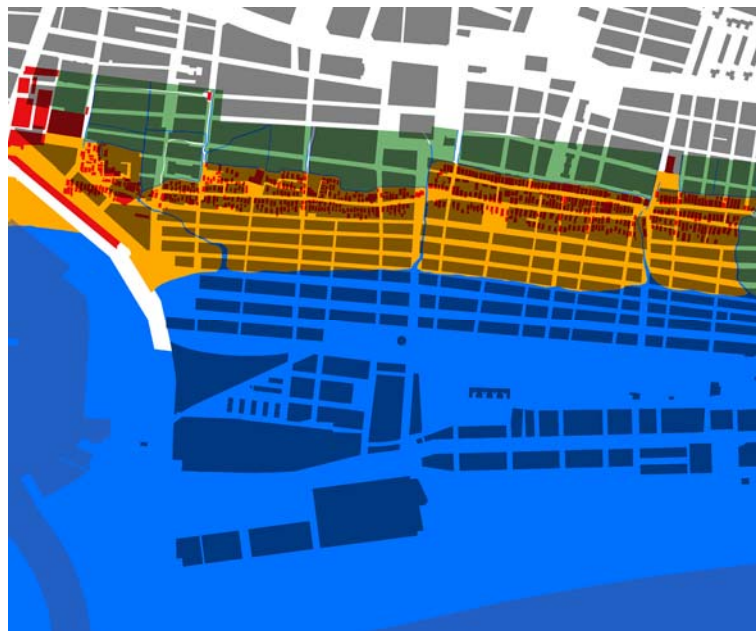


Fig.3.

The figure 3 shows the referred superposition: we can see how the form of the current public space is consequence of the alignments of the old "barracas". The eastwards extension of the physical fabric, upon grounds previously occupied by the sea, evidences the growth experimented by the beach. As for the westwards growth of the urban, it was determined by the permanence of other type of elements: the existing irrigation ditches and rural paths, which served as a pattern around which the area would be structured. From this analysis of the permanence we can draw an important lesson: in the popular town planning, preexistences remain because of pragmatic reasons. The fact that permanences refer to the scope of possibilities of its inhabitants does not only contribute to a development inside the specific cultural identity, but it also guarantees contextual relevance to the inherited elements.

3.2 The typological substitution. The contingency as a factor of development.

As shown in Fig. 3, from 1796 on the neighborhood grows over new lands, progressively gained from the sea. This growth, which is made through rows of "barracas" disposed upon a more regular pattern than the one of its historical core, occupies the whole extension of the neighborhood eastwards. In the late XIXth century and due to the frequent fires that still threatened the neighborhood, the municipality forced the substitution of the "barracas" for more solid buildings. This substitution, however, was not completed instantly; instead, it lasted in time while the owners were able to deal with the costs. The abandonment of the rigid metrics of the "barracas" and the adoption of a more expensive constructive system gave origin to a double process: the subdivision and aggregation of the available plots, and the construction, on this new system of plots, of a vast variety of dwellings (fig. 4)

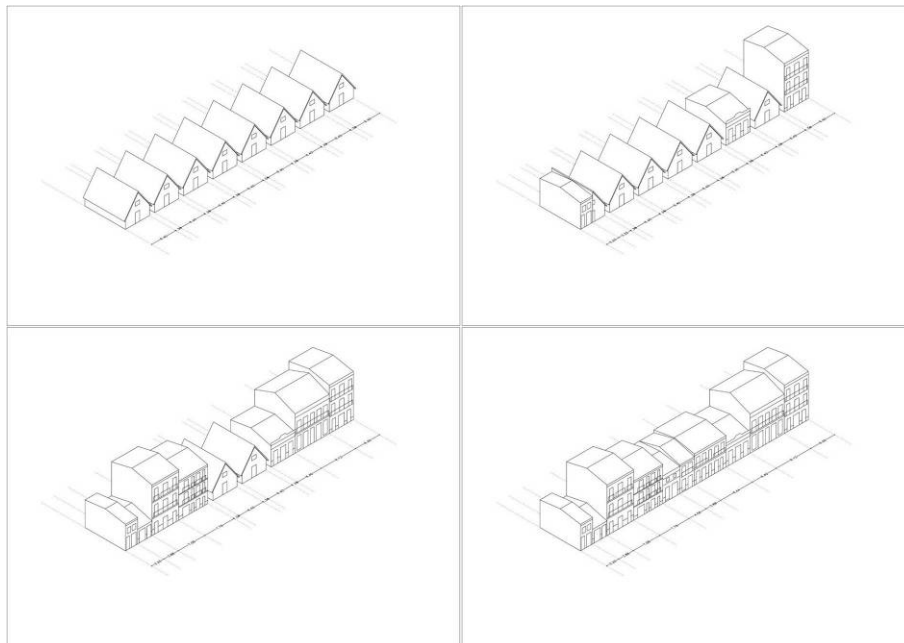


Fig. 4.

This system of private spaces is very important to explain the main characteristics of the neighborhood. Firstly, the moderate density of occupation of the plots explains the calmed traffic of its streets. Secondly, and enhanced by the previous, the nature of the dwellings, most of them with direct contact with the street, favors to an intensive use the sidewalks. Thirdly, the evolution from a system of homogeneous plots and buildings until the current skyline of different heights and façade fronts on plots of varying depths guarantees the existence of complex situations. In fourth place, the inexistence of an stylistic issue contributes to a positive social diversification. The nature of the system of buildings, in short, is essential to bond the road network and the plotting system into the conformation of a complex public space matrix, the complexity of which is inherited from a complex

reality, and whose renovation is conducted through simple individual actions upon small unities of property.

3.3 Organizing the disordered. The relationship dwelling-street

The reticular network of El Cabanyal creates a very simple urban hierarchy which differences the streets parallel to the sea and the alleys which lead to it. While the first ones have the burden of the traffic, the second ones are in their most part pedestrian ways. Its process of formation shows us that, originally, these alleys did not respond to an unitary conception, but to a simple absence of edification where it was needed in order to guarantee its continuity until the beach. To this process is due a characteristic that still remains in the neighborhood: the very specific layout of these alleys, irregularly conformed by the gaps in the streets parallel to the sea.



Fig. 5

This preeminence of the building over the street was maintained all over the XIX century, while the urban regulations treated to ensure the decorum inside the possibilities of this urban landscape. What is interesting here is that the process which led to a certain order in these façade fronts did not respond to an ideal layout, unitary, continuous and pre-established, but to the one suggested by the alignments between the existing buildings and the ones which were to be substituted. The value of the buildings –of the reality- in the relationship between the street and the dwellings shows the important role played by the architecture in the formulation of the urban issue. This value has been inverted during the last century, where the alignments are set beforehand the buildings which have to keep them.

4. Against the fragmentation of the urban problem. The urban landscape as a relief of the theory.

It seems that in the origin of cities there was not a clear distinction between architecture and urbanism: the first one led to the latter. Numerous enclaves of

historical origin are still characterized because of this fact, which leads to the permanence of abundant singular dispositions and to its transformation based in complex evolutionary processes. This way, the historic city diversifies its original conditions and meets a richness difficult to be projected and executed in a rational and instantaneous way. These transformations, a consequence of the changes in the society, the technique and the culture, are guided by the specific identity of a place, which is transmitted and re-elaborated from generation to generation. The built city is, thus, a very specific articulation of the generic conditions of the culture, concretized through the possibilities of its inhabitants.

The beginning of the last century gave start to the total planning of our cities and to the beginning of the end of this desirable symbiosis. For the first time in the city, the whole planning is prior to the architecture, and the architecture to the citizens, turning less a cultural project and more an economical activity. With the citizens far away from the taking of decisions, the control of the public urban spaces remains in hands of a few technicians and politicians highly specialized, what contributes to the deterioration of the concept of "public". Cities, more and more focused on the achievement of an external image, deepen into the competition for the symbol while they disregard the neighborhoods and their future possibilities.

In the case of the historical neighborhoods, this abandonment has an additional ground, which is rooted in a conception of reality where progress and tradition are conceived as opposite terms. This exclusive vision, in the base of the architectural debate of the last century and a conditioner of the tools we use in the management of the city, contradicts what the direct experience of reality tells us: that the tradition is made of successive achievements. This is why it is important that the relationship and modernity abandons its typically ideological position to be articulated through a process which makes them not different positions, but available tools for a common project: the permanent city.

It is possible that the first solution for the city is to properly formulate its problems. Because of it, it is convenient to adopt an approach that helps us to understand the nature of the problematic in play, and as suggested in this article, a possible way is to reflect mostly in the processes and reason from the particular to the general. It seems an intelligent strategy not to discuss the virtues lacking in a place, but to study the problems it really has. In these terms, it is possible that we start to evaluate the inherited city not from an academic point of view, but by means of values rooted in its utility: a factor which has determined the permanences from generation to generation. It is a convenient attitude, because it turns the category of the heritage into a less exclusive one at the same time that it guarantees its survival because of its aperture to evolution.

In order to ensure the correct terms of this evolution it is necessary, also, to operate within the complexity of the urban phenomena, what suggests incorporating a series of principles to its theoretical corpus. Firstly, a consideration of the identity that leads us to clearly difference the above stated utility from its reduction to a mere abstract functionalism. Secondly, a less fragmented thought, capable to incorporate the variables that affect a given situation. Finally, the lecture of this phenomenon not in terms of historical classification, but regarding its relationship with the surrounding organisms. Maybe this way we can overcome the ethereal aim of conciliating past and present and address, with guarantees and without refusals, the singular evolution of a living and complex system such as the urban is.

To recover the idea of city as a permanent Project, more sensitive to its condition of process that to a pretended and fictitious final result is a possible path to reach a new condition of urbanity. It is a position supported by Bernard Huet when he

states that “the reconciliation of the city and the architecture depends, in first place, of our capacity to imagine a new project for the city whose appropriate tools remain still undiscovered”. We conclude with Huet: “The urban project should allow us to renew the idea of permanent project, whose form, in principle, is suggested rather than drawn, and which is made up at a long term around a certain number of cultural evidences (...) a new situation in which the architect blurs against the evidence of the architecture and the architecture against the necessity of the city”¹.

Notes

¹Huet, Bernard. Quoted in PANERAI, Philippe; MANGIN, David *Proyectar la ciudad*. Madrid, Editorial Celeste, 2002.

Legends

Fig.1: The evolution of the city with El Cabanyal in its seafront. Luis Fco. Herrero & Aitor Varea Oro

Fig.2: The relation between the Avenue of Blasco Ibáñez and El Cabanyal. Ayuntamiento de Valencia (left)/Bulevares, CTAV (right)

Fig.3: In color, the state of El Cabanyal in 1796. In grey, the current state of the city. Luis Fco. Herrero & Aitor Varea Oro

Fig.4: The process of typological substitution in El Cabanyal. Luis Fco. Herrero & Aitor Varea Oro. Source: ¡Juégate el tipo! Arquitectura y vivienda para el barrio de El Cabanyal. Editorial UPV, 2011

Fig.5: One of the alleys of el Cabanyal. Rafael Garay.

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Biography

Luis Fco Herrero is an architect, graduated in the School of Architecture of Valencia. Master in Techniques of intervention in the Architectural Heritage (Technical School of Valencia, 1992). He obtained his Master of Advanced Studies in 2009, after concluding his research work “Estructuras aristadas en la construcción protorrenacentista del espacio”. Professor of Architectural Design in the School of Architecture of Valencia and member of PAISAR, a group belonging to the Heritage

Restoration Institute of Valencia, where he has been director for many international workshops and conferences. Editor of the books "Participación ciudadana para el urbanismo del siglo XXI" (ICARO, CTAV 2005) and "¡Juegate el tipo!" (Editorial UPV) together with Aitor Varea Oro. He is member of the Platform "Salvem el Cabanyal" since 1998. As an architect, he has been awarded with the Premio de Arquitectura del Colegio Oficial del Colegio de Arquitectos de Valencia 1995 (together with ACME) and more recently, with the Grand Prix Europa Nostra, category conservation, together with Carmel Gradolí and Arturo Sanz.

Aitor Varea Oro is an architect, graduated in the School of Architecture of Valencia and former student of the Faculdade de Arquitectura e Artes da Universidade Lusiada do Porto. He received his Master of Advanced Studies in the area of Architectural Projects after concluding his research work on the evolution of São Victor's Quarter (Oporto), a SAAL Project by Alvaro Siza. For the last years, he has been especially interested in the issue of urban regeneration in traditional neighborhoods. Within this scope, he has performed a continuous research in the framework of PAISAR, a group belonging to the Heritage Restoration Institute of Valencia. With PAISAR, he has organized several international workshops and conferences, including "Tras Siza" in 2008 and the series "Permanence and transformation in historical fabrics", in 2010 and 2012. Together with Luis Fco. Herrero he is the author for many papers, articles and lectures on Urban research and the specific case of El Cabanyal, including the teaching book "¡Juegate el tipo!" about housing projects for the possible evolution for this neighborhood.