Urban Policy as a Main Key towards Sustainable Built Environment of Popular Neighbourhood: Case Study of "El Cabanyal" Valencia Spain

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Abstract. El Cabanyal, a popular neighbourhood and old fishermen's village, in the Valencian Community, eastern Spain, is a very explicit example on how popular neighbourhoods can be drastically transformed in line with urban policies' evolution. This neighbourhood -that has a strong cultural identity expressed by its vernacular architecture, local art and social life- kept resisting gentrification during the last 30 years. As a result, this neighbourhood has shown a great deal of deterioration as a price that had to pay in order to keep its own identity within the Mediterranean city of Valencia.

This paper demonstrates the evolution of local and popular neighbourhoods according to adopted urban policies by taking the neighbourhood of El Cabanyal as a case study. Therefore, it will firstly scrutinize the proposed urban policies/strategies by the regional government in order to develop this neighbourhood. Secondly, it will shed light on the participatory design solutions based on the local community involvement, to develop the area without destruction and getting use of its potentials. Finally, it will propose a diagnostic tool and ecological urban solutions that can be elaborated in order to tackle such complex problems.

We believe that the change of urban policies can give different spectrums to sustainable development strategies by addressing social problems and heritage conservation questions. The delicacy of the issue is a typical 21st Century problem encountering different contexts. It can be an obstacle for sustainable urban/social development if not addressed correctly. This is why it must be integrated in the strategies proposed by urban policies' decision makers.

1. Introduction

Urban integration of popular neighbourhoods in the modern world is a complex process, especially when sustainable built environment is taken into consideration. This process takes other composite dimensions for neighbourhoods with strong identities that related to patrimonial and social practices. In many cases, urban policies are the main factor determining whether these neighbourhoods are considered as potential keys or threats to sustainable development in the modern world. El Cabanyal, a popular neighbourhood and old fishermen’s village in the Valencian region, eastern Spain is a very explicit example of this complex process.
1.1. El Cabanyal As A Fishermen Village

‘El Cabanyal’ is a historical district of the city of Valencia. Its origins, as an old fishermen's village, go back to the 15th century. The profession and the lifestyle of its inhabitants has shaped the urban tissue into distinctive parallel coastal grid. El Cabanyal is distinct with a specific vernacular architecture and a strong cultural identity that made of the neighbourhood a patrimonial historical pearl, declared in 1993 as an Asset of Cultural Interest (BIC)[1].

1.2. El Cabanyal in a Contemporary Context

Despite its historical importance, El Cabanyal has been suffering from a state of degradation due to political pressure, put by the previous municipal government in order to execute an operation of regenerative urban agenda, known as PEPRI1, without taking neither the historical background nor the cultural identity into consideration. Consequently, this neighbourhood kept resisting gentrification during the last 30 years. As a result, El Cabanyal has shown a great deal of deterioration as a price that had to be paid in order to keep its own identity within the Mediterranean city of Valencia.

Nevertheless, the neighbourhood is relatively saved thanks to opposite urban movements and associations that represent the local community while taking part in the decision making process and strongly influencing the urban policy making.

The paper is based on a thesis of a graduation project, by the co-author that proposes somehow a method to repairing the damage done in the maritime part of the Valencian capital. It aims at providing a global solution of rehabilitation and restoration of the neighbourhood while focusing on the cultural heritage as a key to develop sustainably the built environment of the popular district without putting its authentic identity at risk. The goal is to frame a method to follow to help popular neighbourhoods becoming sustainable, especially those suffering from disparities compared to the urban fabric and socio-cultural structures of their neighbouring zones.

2. Paper's Aim and Interests

The research's main aim is to develop a diagnostic tool that can be used in the case of popular neighbourhoods at risk of losing their identities due to political or local policies. These zones suffer from disparities compared to their enironing urban fabric, hence an imbalance of their socio-cultural structure and a threat to their neighbouring areas. The research's ultimate goal is to draw both viable analytical and intervention stratagems that will help these particular popular neighbourhoods evolving in order to become sustainably built environments coherent with the surrounding community.

3. Research Approach & Framework

This paper is based on a research work done by the co-author for his graduation project under the supervision of the author at the School of Architecture at the French University of Egypt and the INSA de Strasbourg for the year 2017/2018. The main objective of the project was to develop an urban stratum of El Cabanyal as a tool towards rehabilitation and restoration of the damaged maritime part of Valencia, while focusing on its cultural heritage as a potent factor of its development and the conservation of its popular identity. Consequently, the Valencian social and cultural aspects were studied for over a year in order to understand the local values and traditions.

3.1. Field Survey & Site Visits

The surveying procedure aimed at observing the city of Valencia in general and El Cabanyal in particular to apprehend a global understanding of the context. It considered the two possible points of view. The first, adapted by the past regional government and the PP party, is based on the need of radical interventions plus a "once for all" integration of the entire neighbourhood within the city. This integration will act on both physical and moral levels via changing the city's actual structure and is completely controlled by the local authorities. The second point of view -backed up by El Cabanyal

1 Plan Especial Protección y Reforma Interior approved in 2001 by the Regional Government.
citizens, Valencian nationalists and the current regional government- adopts a softer approach of intervention and promotes for a bottom-up dialogue with the local inhabitants, yet without a real agreement on the action method. Despite their differences, both point of view agreed on the existence of an urban problem that needs an intervention strategy to end the deterioration affecting the zone.

Both point of views were deeply scrutinized through three site visits during the spring and summer of 2017 and 2018. During these visits, the co-author focused on the observation of the neighbourhood's condition while summarizing and taking notes on the socio-cultural context and backgrounds of the inhabitants. The visits also coincided with special cultural manifestations of the area such as "La semana santa marinera" (Easter celebration) and the local market held every Thursday. Furthermore, field survey included the observation of some virtual platforms such as the website-forum Salvem El Cabanyal and the Association of neighbours of El Cabanyal (Associació de veins i veines del Cabanyal). The "Salvem" forum was and still is the main defender of the neighbourhood’s identity against the destructive urban policy. These forums offers an extensive documentation and justified explanations in English, Spanish and Valencian, three languages mastered by the authors.

3.2. Finding a Diagnostic Tool
The research had to take the conclusions of the proposed projects and the survey outcomes into an evaluative phase. These proposed projects represent an example of the impact of urban policies on actual grounds and illustrate how the change of these policies can have a drastic influence on the urbanization process. Our aim was mainly to find a diagnostic method that leads eventually to a key intervention for sustainable built environment in popular neighbourhoods with strong identity and public opinion. This goal is to be reached through urban associations representing the local community while taking part in the decision making process and the urban policy application. This method comes in harmony with "UN Habitat III" principles of planned urbanization according to Dr Joan Clos's three pillars: Rules and Regulations, Urban Design, and a Financial Plan [2]. Together they form a three legged approach towards sustainable urbanization.

3.3. Application on El Cabanyal as Research Object
An adapted diagnostic approach was needed to attain viable solutions and action plans for the core problem. This adapted approach will also ensure a sustainable development for El Cabanyal within the same urban agenda of the city of Valencia. Hence, our diagnostic tool will rely on three main pillars:

Understanding El Cabanyal's Identity via literature review and filed work. The field work is done physically by the co-author, also involved in the online platforms of urban movements such as "Salvem El Cabanyal" (Save El Cabanyal). The latter emerged to defend El Cabanyal against destruction proposed by the local authorities;

![Figure 1: The diagnostic plan and the three pillars of urban organization. Source: Authors](image-url)
2- Analysis of Valencian urban policies and their evolution in the last three decades. The main key to understand and contextualize popular actions -that fought against El Cabanyal’s destruction- is to trace urban policies of the Spanish authorities since the annexation of the fishermen village to the city in the late 19th century. These policies have been influenced by political opinion of the governing conservative party before the rise of nationalist Valencian party in 2015. Urban policies, that hooked up on commodification of the built environment worldwide, geared the city of Valencia towards mega projects integrating the sea as a main factor while neglecting the identity of El Cabanyal;

3- Possible integration of El Cabanyal within the City whilst conserving its identity. It is very important to shift our perspective to see from inside the Valencian community. This paradigm shift, also more compatible with current political policies, will cater for the determination of the most suitable zones for intervention on the urban design level. The three pillars of the diagnostic method are equally important and in the same order (Figure 1). The first step aims to completely apprehend the studied area via a variety of field work and literature review and analysis of the nowadays status. The second pillar links the current status to its origins and questions the urban policy in action. Finally, the third led to studying the area as a part of larger urban mechanism. This is to ensure a more holistic approach and to find practical interventions adapted to the well-studied context.

4. El Cabanyal: A Neighbourhood Facing A Brutal Gentrification Process

4.1. Valencian Urban Politics: An Ambition to Link the City to the Mediterranean Sea

![Figure 2: Analysis of the current state of El Cabanyal, with the destructed buildings shown in black, buildings owned by the city council in white. Source: Bordas+Peiro Architects (2011) for an AJAC prize winning urban project.](image)

El Cabanyal community in Valencia is considered recently the most struggling civil society in Spain against its municipal government [3]. Effectively, the political will behind El Cabanyal has always been consistent in a destructive approach as the popular neighbourhood represented an urban obstacle for the city council [1]. The latter was aiming at extending the road network through the neighbourhood to the
Mediterranean Sea. The future project would result in a complete metamorphosis of the neighbourhood's urban fabric and a loss of its identity.

Despite the non-execution of the municipal project, *El Cabanyal* has already started to suffer from an accelerated gentrification process, especially after the destruction of many typical local houses (Figure 2). The gentrification process manifested itself under various forms: the most remarkable one started at the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century by the progressive imitation of the old city centre's social practices and way of life in *El Cabanyal* community in opposition to its urban fabric socio-cultural structure. Consequently, the *Valencian* lifestyle invaded literally *El Cabanyal* social and cultural identities. This process was accelerated in the last decades, by the recent actions of the local *Valencian* authorities, and reflected particularly on the evolution of architectural typology that went from the old historic *barraca* model to small three-four story buildings and lately to high rise buildings, especially in the zones closer to the city. This evolution was also accentuated by the demolition of more than 400 buildings, containing more than 1600 apartments/houses, after transferring their property to the city council, sometimes by forced agreements. More explicitly, buildings that survived are those whose locations weren't obstacles in the expansion of the city roads to the sea. This action is actually an evidence that the radical political plan wasn't aiming at linking the two parts of the city. On the contrary, it was about melting the neighbourhood within the city of Valencia to make use of the seaside as an attractive touristic spot that was an obstacle for investors (backed up by liberal-conservative local authorities).

The PEPR\textsuperscript{I} project reflected the vision of the neo-liberal political urban policy practiced by the governing party at the time. Physical actions in that project would result in more radical gentrification, not only by changing the local architecture, urban fabric or public space structure, but also by replacing the local community with another one socially and culturally different.

4.2. *The Part of El Cabanyal in the Strategic Plan*

*El Cabanyal* is a living example of what a local resistance can be. This action started when some groups of local neighbours structured an antagonistic power against the municipal urban policy. The opposition actors managed to raise legitimate and confronting visions concerning the area's future that resulted in the stoppage of the PEPR\textsuperscript{I} project in December 2009. This urban opponent power has actually shown an alternative creative way on how to re-imagine a city while integrating neighbourhoods with authentic identities. The local power succeeded in re-politicizing the urban agenda as a collective decision against the arrangements of the neo-liberal governance in a profound de-politicization of urban policies [1]. The case of *El Cabanyal* reveals how the collective power can be translated into political urban strategies. Nevertheless, and despite the growing power of the opposite action, the urban void silenced the area and made it less populated and less socially interactive. As a result, many local residents left the neighbourhood for the uncertainty of its future. The area was labelled “*Zona cero*” or (Zero Zone) for its un-safety. This sense of insecurity, especially at night, is also interpreted by drug dealing that got installed in the neighbourhood. The newly elected government made attempts to encourage people returning to the neighbourhood. Consequently, as visited in 2018, the local market is full of people, Thursday market takes place and is sufficiently populated. Students from near-by university campuses recently opted for the neighbourhood as a possible place to live in. However, many people still remain sceptical about moving back. We believe that there is a need for stronger and more organized interventions of contemporary adaptation.

5. *The Rescue Of An Urban Identity Via The Reproduction Of Sustainable Spatial Solutions*

5.1. *The Urban Identity Conservation: The Urban Knowledge*

*El Cabanyal* inhabitants' opposition is completely legitimate, as they were initially fighting for their right to the city. The need for re-appropriating private and public spaces that used to belong to them is obvious. This spatial necessity linked different social categories of the *El Cabanyal* neighbourhoods under the same cause. We believe that the key solution for this urban conflict between them and municipalities of Valencia inheres in the sustainable development of the built environment of *El*
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6

Cabanyal. This can be achieved via producing alternative urban futures other than those previously proposed by the authorities. The identity of the neighbourhood, its cultural image and its evolution must be integrated as potential keys in the future urban plan. Moreover, the fusion of the local community and their strong perseverance are also assets to be considered. The identity conservation of El Cabanyal refers particularly to a collective living memory of the population, to different ways of life that took place in the heart of the Valencian Capital. It marks a popular resistance against a negative gentrification process and destruction intents. El Cabanyal identity expresses the Valencian uniqueness conserved along centuries and distinct compared to the historic city centre (influenced by the central Spanish urban model and mechanism). This is why, it has become an icon and a model to follow, especially in local community organisation, social cohesion, the sense of responsibility and strong will to protect popular values. This is why a successful urban intervention can be a proof of effectiveness of the diagnostic method and an exemplary tool, to reach sustainable built environment, adapted to a popular neighbourhood that can be mimicked and adapted to other similar cases.

5.2. Urban Spatial re-Production Policy: The Urban Project

The action plan for urban intervention is about limited physical interference in a chosen urban stratum of the parallel grid of El Cabanyal. The chosen part is actually the mostly affected by demolitions according to the "PEPRI". The intervention will take place in the heart of the area and everyday-life space that is connected to the local church, the municipal market and the Plaça de Flor square. This place is easily accessible from the Cabanyal Train Station and Blasco Ibañez Avenue.

![Figure 3](image)

**Figure 3:** (a) Analysis of the circulation around the stratum, (b) Analysis of the nodes and important elements around the stratum, (c) Analysis of the current built environment (solids) around the stratum & (d) Analysis of the current public space considered in the project (voids) around the stratum.

Source: Co-Author, 2018.

The project consists of transforming this stratum into a cultural hub for the Valencian population. This will be materialized through the management of the public space and the pedestrianization of two streets. Consequently, the proposed project will be making use of El Cabanyal lifestyle according to which public space is considered as semi-private where neighbours meet and do most of their activities. Moreover, the proposal includes the installation culture-related buildings that provides activities linked to the popular heritage. These culturally-based buildings will be in contact with proposed intermediate public spaces to host all kinds of cultural manifestations or events. The potential of the chosen area
resides in its strong association to the neighbourhood, the easy accessibility from the rest of the city as it can offer an example for a sensible urban intervention. The latter will be done by redesigning new urban spaces based on the diagnostic tool (Figure 3). It will help generating an attractive zone enhanced by the exiting social interrelations and the urban dynamics of this Mediterranean context. The dynamics created by this intervention will act as igniters for an urban action or an example to follow that can reach the rest of the neighbourhood. Accordingly, on a larger scale, the rehabilitation of such an area will have also other consequences concerning the urban mechanism governing the relation between El Cabanyal and the municipalities since the annexation of the old fisherman village to the city. The proposed project shows how an urban policy can save a popular neighbourhood by using a correct diagnostic tool. It illustrates the articulation between two opposed urban models. The first doesn't take the area's cultural power into consideration while the second adds more values to the heritages in the area. The project seeks developing social quality/cohesion in both outdoor and indoor spaces, as the conceptual space and the material space will be fused in the everyday "lived space"[4]. Therefore, the rehabilitation alone of old houses will not be enough as the addition of some buildings integrated with El Cabanyal identity will complete the action to add value to public spaces (Figures 4). We believe that the proposed project is capable of adding values to the current neighbourhood. The newly managed public spaces will act as a magnet and gain more the attention of visitors and foreigners who will rediscover the area through an itinerary of well-placed cultural nodes connecting pedestrian pathways through El Cabanyal ant all the way to the sea.

Figure 4 : (a) Physical model of the proposal in the scale of 1/200 (Left) showing the urban stratum and the added buildings in the voids (buildings in white are the proposed addition), (b) Exploded axonometric view of the proposal within the City (Right), showing the added volumes (in Cyan), the existing voids and the public space in question. Source: Authors

6. Conclusion
We live in a world where the "lived space" became politicized [5]; a symbol of domination where the user has no say on how his liveable space or his own spatial practices should be or will be. Imagination and creativity are killed and buried in the planning of the modern city where spaces become more generic and the notion of "city life" is rather commercialized; "lived space" is no longer existent as there is no room and no interest for it anymore.
Urban policies became an evident mechanism to control the social space/practices, to determine social exclusion or to limit social inclusion. These same urban policies could work, however, on restoring identities or creating new social platforms for expressing creativity. This continuous tensions gave birth to subversive socio-spatial movements that link various social categories who got united around the same cause which is: gaining back their everyday lived space. Social re-appropriation of the lived space by locals is like the light at the end of the tunnel that will guide them through to rescue their identity and to create their own space [6].

El Cabanyal neighbourhood is a part of city among others that struggled against being metamorphosed by neo-liberal forces. Urban social movements, struggles, frictions and resistances by community associations are the soldiers behind this resistance. In fact the famous neighbourhood showed the real potential of dessensus -as a source of creativity and original actions- against a hegemonic urban policy that neglects its cultural identity [7]. El Cabanyal's "lived space" has finally witnessed a sacred platform from which phoenix has finally rose to contest against spatial injustice. This is how a new urban agenda is imposed by the people and for the people, as diverse social actors and citizens cooperatives worked together to represent an urban alternative that allows El Cabanyal's inhabitants to live without being soulless.

Our research proved through filed study together with literature review how strongly the local identity is present in the everyday-life space, in the narrow streets of the neighbourhood of El Cabanyal. This is why, the proposed intervention was concentrating on how physically we can repair the damages while being very sensible to the social and cultural aspects when dealing with this popular neighbourhood. Moreover, it was very important to be well aware of the different factors that were behind the change of the urban policy of intervention in El Cabanyal:

1. The most important factor is the strong popular resistance that reflects a high sense of citizens' responsibility to defend their own identity and the desire to keep it intact;
2. The rule of laws and legal protection over patrimonial heritage and culture, materialized particularly in the sentence of the Spanish courts ordering the stoppage of the project;
3. The political shift, with the rise of Valencian Nationalists (Compromís) who replaced the Spanish conservatives (PP) which lead to the change of the municipality’s plan vis-à-vis popular neighbourhoods.

In this particular context since 2015, with the politically guided shift in urban policy, El Cabanyal is no longer seen as an obstacle to economically efficient projects and the Valencian speculative maritime façade plan. It is rather seen as a local community of iconic importance with potentials of an interesting cultural heritage and geographical distinctiveness that should be protected. In addition, the growing attention towards achieving sustainable built environment made it clear that the urban tissue should be tackled differently. This is why our diagnostic tool, with its three pillars, was of a great benefits to be able to propose a project that adds values to the neighbourhood without oppressing its identity. This is diagnostic tool that worked beneficially with El Cabanyal can also be applied to other popular neighbourhoods with strong identities at risk of brutal gentrification.

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