

Los movimientos urbanos y su reclamo por el “derecho a la ciudad” en Valencia: *Salvem el Cabanyal*

Salvem el Cabanyal: Urban movements and their claim for the “Right to the City” in Valencia

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Received 2014.05.19

Accepted 2014.09.22

Resumen: En los últimos 15 años una red de movimientos sociales urbanos ha brotado alrededor de Valencia bajo el nombre del ‘*Salvem*’. El objetivo principal de estos es proteger su territorio de lo que consideran una amenaza externa. Centrándose en el caso de *Salvem el Cabanyal*, este artículo muestra que cuando un plan de renovación urbana amenaza con borrar un barrio consolidado, el conflicto urbano puede ser utilizado por una comunidad bien organizada para aumentar su poder, confrontar el plan urbanístico y reclamar su “derecho a la ciudad”, que es el derecho a vivir, crear, usar y participar en las decisiones que afectan a su barrio. La plataforma más interesante que *Salvem* ha utilizado para canalizar sus protestas y comprometer la resistencia crítica contra el plan es el taller de arte ‘*Portes Obertes*’, una forma de utilizar el arte y la arquitectura vernácula para reforzar reclamo de los vecinos en su lucha. Sin embargo, si el conflicto se embellece centrándose simplemente en el valor histórico y cultural del barrio, y por lo tanto, olvidándose de las verdaderas causas que subyacen detrás de él, el movimiento podría parar el plan, pero perdería la oportunidad de transformación de ganar su “derecho a la ciudad”, abordando así las condiciones estructurales que han provocado que el derecho a ser desatendido.

Palabras clave: regeneración urbana, conflicto, el *Cabanyal*, derecho a la ciudad.

Abstract: In the last 15 years a network of urban social movements has sprouted around Valencia under the name of the ‘*Salvem*’ [Let’s save]. The main objective of these is to protect their territory from what they consider an external threat. Focusing on the case of *Salvem el Cabanyal* [Save Cabanyal], this article shows that when a mayor urban renewal plan threatens to erase a consolidated neighborhood, urban conflict can be used by a well-organized community to empower themselves, confront the urban plan and claim their Right to the City, which is the right to live, create, use and take part in the decisions that affect their neighborhood. The most intriguing platform that *Salvem* has used to channel their protests and engage critical resistance against the plan is the art workshop ‘*Portes Obertes*’ [Open Door], a way of using art and vernacular architecture to reinforce neighbors’ claim in their struggle. However, if the conflict is beautified focusing merely on the historical and cultural value of the neighborhood, hence forgetting the real causes that underlay behind it, the movement might stop the plan, but it will lose the transformative opportunity of gaining their Right to the City, thus tackling the structural conditions that have caused that right to be neglected.

Keywords: Urban Regeneration, Conflict, El *Cabanyal*, Right to the City.



Figure 1. Typical façades of traditional houses.

INTRODUCTION

The recent social movements all over Spain, especially in Valencia, and the current atmosphere of urban discontent have inspired the writing of this essay. According to the urban sociologist Fernando Díaz Orueta, Valencia is one of the cities in Spain that has produced the most important social response from its civil society in recent years. In fact, in the last 15 years a network of urban social movements against “neoliberal urbanism”¹ has sprouted all around the city under the label of the ‘Salvem’ movements. The main objective of this urban movements is to save and protect their territory from the ‘external’ threats of speculative development.² The aim of this essay is to show the urban conflict of El Cabanyal neighborhood as a good example of how a well-organized and mobilized civil society can manage to freeze and confront a plan and the obsession of a despotic neoliberal authority, who is mainly focused on the economic profit and political power obtained from a major urban intervention.

Over the last decade, the battle between the municipal government in Valencia and the community of the neighborhood of ‘El Cabanyal’ has been one of the most notorious and lengthy urban struggles in the country. The first part of this work will explain how decentralization together with political and market enablement have driven to the current conflict. It will then delve into the meaning of the Right to the City and how this conflict, derived from the struggle of claiming the Right to the City, is not understood as a violent expression or protest³, rather as an opportunity to initiate a real transformation and potentially, can spark off as well the possibility of enabling structural change. Conflict, in this context of El Cabanyal has been the trigger of community empowerment through participation and social mobilization in this unique neighborhood, channeled through several civil platforms.

The second part of this essay will look at the urban movement of ‘Salvem el Cabanyal’ which is the



Figure 2. Ornament detail of one of the façades.

most important of the *Salvem* movements in terms of impact, and the best-organized and active of all. Focusing on this urban conflict, the paper will analyze one of the weapons used by the weak - the community of 'El Cabanyal' - to engage in critical resistance against the exclusionary and oppressing forces of the neoliberal governance, which has been intertwined to local politics during the past decades. This essay will show how community enablement through empowerment and participation has started to re-shape those power relations, thus searching for a real democracy where difference and diversity can still find spaces of confrontation in order to reconfigure those power relations. However, the empowerment and participation of the community always has trade-offs, imposing some views over others, according to the new power structures.

The object of dispute: A hidden treasure

'El Cabanyal' is the name of the historical district in the coast of Valencia. This unique and picturesque neighborhood has its origins in the XV century as

a fisherman's village. The vernacular architecture of the time and the livelihoods of the inhabitants shaped the urban fabric in the form of a dense grid, parallel to the coastline, a distinctive urban pattern in the city. After several disasters, the old traditional 'barracas' [shack or cabin] disappeared and were substituted in the beginning of the XX century by terraced houses with a very unique and particular modernist style, following and preserving the previous urban grid. These houses, built by the neighbors with vernacular materials and decorated with colorful tiles follow the Art-Nouveau style of that period, but with their very personal reinterpretation, conferring a unique value to the neighbourhood.⁴ This popular and particular architectural style is the most distinctive feature of 'El Cabanyal'. The gridded urban fabrics together with this eclectic architecture are the two elements as to why the historical area was protected in 1993 declaring it Asset of Cultural Interest (BIC). (Figures 1, 2 and 3)

The social network community of 'El Cabanyal' is very diverse and eclectic. The bulks mass of the



Figure 3. Elongation project by Engineer Casimiro Meseguer from 1883, included in the Urban Plan by Municipal Architect J.M Cortina 1899.

population is low-middle class working people. Old people that have been living in the neighborhood since they were born form the most representative group. They feel a sense of belonging since their ancestors come from here and still maintain the local culture and traditions, which they have inherited from their parents and grandparents. They have a strong sense of identity, community and closeness to each other. On the other hand, we find also ethnic groups of Roma people that have informally populated the district for a long time, who have been associated to problems of marginality, drugs and crime, much of which are considered to be the stigma of the neighborhood. This complex scenario is completed in a smaller percentage, with some student groups, due to its proximity to the university, young people attracted by the potentials of the neighborhood and the cheap prices, and also an increase of immigrants has been observed.

The power

There is no doubt that decentralization is key to deepening democracy and essential to scaling-up any policy that can empower communities at the local levels. However, in line with Hickey and Mohan⁵, I will argue that this is not always the outcome of decentralization. In Spain the technocratic decentralization of the state has deeply shaped the power relations of the local government with the central state and the community. Decentralization has not been conceived as a "political project aimed at transforming state legitimacy and forging a new contract between citizens and the local state". At the local level, corruption and unfair or despotic practices can be less accountable and more difficult to chase. In the case of Valencia, this political enablement has resulted in a "greater control over state resources and use them to consolidate electoral support, or new client sectors can be

*favoured by these policies*⁶, using funds following a political rather than a welfare criteria.

At the same time and at the local and regional level, authorities have applied very aggressive neoliberal policies. Valencia has gone from being a rather unknown city in the eastern coast of Spain to a modern city competing in the market of world-class cities in the last decade. In order to make this transformation possible, both the Socialist government in 1994, and followed later in 1995 (until now) by the government of Partido Popular [Popular Party],⁷ promoted a structuralist and speculative urban development through land deregulation and attracted private investment through a strategy of mega events such as Americas Cup and F1 championship and mega projects like 'Ciudad de las Artes y las Ciencias' [City of Arts and Sciences]. These "market enablement policies" have no doubt enhanced socio economic inequalities in the city and "have seriously disadvantaged the poor and sections of the middle class, benefitted owners rather than tenants and the periphery rather than the inner city".⁸ The outcome of these kinds of policies is an excessive investment in these projects, events and new sites of speculation, to the detriment of the other existing areas.

The Right to the City

"The Right to the City is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. (...) The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights."⁹

During the 60s, within the core of social movements, the Right to the City emerged as a highly politicized discourse in a revolutionary context such as in

*May 1968.*¹⁰ Lefebvre came up with the original conception of the slogan in his paper *Le Droit à la Ville*, which meant a new paradigm shift of urban life and citizens' rights, challenging the existing social and political entrenched structures of the time. Lefebvre's RTC embraces the idea of the city as a public place for social encounter and exchange that fosters spaces where diversity and heterogeneity can concur. That encounter of difference results in a struggle between its inhabitants to think, shape and live the city and hence, to claim who has the right to citizenship in the city.¹¹ The powerful and transformative message conveyed in his manifesto was not the fact that Lefebvre was demanding specific rights in the city, but demanding for the RTC itself, to the right of what he considered urban life.

The RTC manifests itself as "right to freedom, to individualization in socialization, to habit and to inhabit".¹² Citizens are entitled to participate in the spatial production of the city, and citizenship enfranchises them with two superior rights in this production of urban space: participation and appropriation. Purcell argues that it "is an argument for profoundly reworking both the social relations of capitalism and the current structure of liberal-democratic citizenship".¹³ In line with Mitchell (2003), I will argue that what Lefebvre advocates for is the right of citizens to participate in the decision making process of that spatial production but also, the right to appropriate the space, and hence to occupy, use and, furthermore, create new spaces that accommodate the needs of the urban people. This results in the control over the socio-spatial relations in the urban realm, balancing the relation social use-value of the city and economic value. When this relation is not balanced, favoring the latter, Lefebvre argues that the "œuvre" is suppressed.

The RTC symbolizes a challenge to the capitalist order, as it claims for "a call for a radical restructuring of social, political, and economic relations, both in the city and beyond".¹⁴ However, according to Purcell (1996), Lefebvre limits the RTC to a single social group, to an anti-capitalist struggle, dismissing the fact that everyone has its own agenda. He homogenizes the claim overseeing different identities and political interests. Furthermore, he states that though Lefebvre's RTC not only contests the capitalism structures and offers alternative visions of those, it is not clear what would be the socio-spatial outcomes of it.¹⁵ The RTC is not only a claim to have the right of being part of that city, but the right to question it and demand a new one, hence, demand for a structural reconfiguration of the power system that sculpts the city and dictates the production and reconfiguration of space.

*Looking at Harvey's work it is clear that the kind of cities we want to make, is directly intertwined with the question of what kind of society and citizens we want to be, and this "depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the process of urbanization"¹⁶ and thus "the city has never been a harmonious place, free of confusions, conflicts, violence".¹⁷ He further claims that to unify all the different struggles we have to "adopt the RTC as both working slogan and political ideal".¹⁸ In his latest book, *Rebel Cities*, he affirms that, without dismissing Lefebvre's seminal work, *The Right to the City* is both a cry and a demand. For him, it is clear the struggle for the Right to the City brings to surface the fact that the city is no longer a political place of encounter among its citizens, but a constructed image that symbolizes the current trends of neoliberal capitalism and transnational globalization.*

Through their protests, actions and organization, the neighbors of El Cabanyal are claiming their

right to the city, the one they want to live in. They demand their right to produce, use and decide what their neighborhood should be like. They organized themselves and performed multiple and critical activities to engage all neighbors and show their alternative and transgressive visions of what El Cabanyal potentially could be, how it should be managed and by whom. Concentrations, protests, workshops, elaboration of alternative proposals, debates, etc. brought together different associations in the neighborhood, collectives and social movements to work for a common goal: their right to their neighborhood. However, the authorities could not allow empowered neighbors to question their role in deciding the future of El Cabanyal by imposing a totalitarian vision of the city with a plan that would destroy an important part of the neighborhood, the socio spatial relations linked to it and the urban memories knitted through time between the people of El Cabanyal.

The conflict

"...the local state is typically unaware of sacrilege when it reduces a neighborhood to rubble in order to make way for a profitable real estate venture such as an office building or shopping mall. By whatever name, whether it's slum clearance or gentrification, the results are the same: the erasure of places is a violent act, as established patterns of human relationships are destroyed."¹⁹

The extension of the Blasco Ibañez Avenue in order to reach the sea through El Cabanyal, is a clear example of one of these mega-urban projects. The plan, as briefly mentioned above, will destroy part of the gridded urban fabric, resulting in the division of the neighborhood in two disconnected halves, not only from a spatial view, but also destroying the existing socio-economic network and the livelihoods



Figures 4 and 5. Area affected by the extension of the Blasco Ibáñez Avenue.

of the inhabitants a great number of which have been living in the neighborhood since they were born. The plan, promoted by the local government in 1998 is known as PEPRI (Plan Especial de Protección y Reforma Interior/Special Plan of Protection and Interior Reform) and implies as well, according to Platform 'Salvem el Cabanyal', the demolition of 1600 homes and 600 buildings, many of which are considered heritage and protected by law.²⁰

Together with the traditional houses, two historical buildings symbol of the district's historical identity like a fisherman's village would disappear: the old 'Lonja de Pescadores' (fish market) (now occupied by local people that have reconverted it into a dwelling) and the 'Casa dels Bous' (the house of the bulls). Initially this urban project had a participatory process: three options were publicly exposed and people could vote and choose one of them. The elected option was not the one the authorities wanted so they manipulated the

results to impose their proposal in a bureaucratic manoeuvre, using their power to undermine the community's will.²¹

The intention behind this intervention is to promote speculation freeing land in the affected area to private investors so they can build and sell high-rise expensive blocks. The two thousand people affected by evictions and demolitions will not be able to afford the new houses in the free market and will be forced to abandon the neighborhood. The authorities, once more, with "market enablement policies" aim to make economic surpluses and political profits out of it. What they claim as a regeneration project is a hidden process of gentrification. (Figures 4 and 5).

To accelerate this process and justify the need of the urban plan, which according to the local authority is the only solution to regenerate and revitalize the neighborhood, the local government has been doing what is known as real estate mobbing in the



Figure 6. Image of the platform 'Salvem el Cabanyal' in a demonstration against the plan.

district. Instead of trying to solve the actual socio-economic problems of the 'El Cabanyal', these have been heightened by the total abandonment of the district by the authorities and the lack of public investment in preservation, basic infrastructure and social services. In fact, the worsening of these problems is a major argument in pro of the PEPRI. As a result, many owners have left the neighborhood and prices have gone down, typical of the first stages of gentrification processes. The authorities have bought many houses in the neighborhood that have been left abandoned and in a derelict state, allowing squatters to occupy them despite the complaints of the locals, with the finality to demolish them. Nevertheless, the worst problem is the permissiveness of the police with drugs and criminality, having what the sociologist Miguel Ángel Martínez calls "surveyed marginality" in the district, which stresses furthermore its social degradation and contributes to the stigmatization of being from 'El Cabanyal'.

This plan has raised lots of voices against it from all stratas of society: civic society, renowned architects

and urban planners countrywide, academia, politicians, national and international media. The legal and social dispute of the municipality over this issue has to scales: national with the previous socialist government who has stopped the plan and declared the project illegal, accusing it of heritage spoliation; and local with the affected neighbors of 'El Cabanyal', who after the manipulation of the participation process started to organize themselves and mobilize against the plan creating the civic platform 'Salvem el Cabanyal'.

The atmosphere of tension around the conflict between the different players involved has even risen to a radical level after the municipal government started the demolition of some affected houses in 2009, even though, as mentioned above, the plan was stopped by the central government and highly criticized by the European Union. However, despite this contestation, conflict is understood not as a "form of protest or contrary provocation; but rather, as micro-political practice through which the participant becomes an active agent who insists on being an actor in the force field they are facing".²² Conflict conceived as a catalyst for a kind of participation, which is understood as a form of critical engagement of social and spatial concerns that has empowered the community to negotiate and reach their goals and aspirations. (Figure 6)

THE RE-ACTION

According to Mitlin and Johnson "...there has been an increase in 'social movements' grounded in identities related to gender, place and ethnicity"²³, and these movements are characterized by the concern to demand rights of citizenship from the state, and to express social resistance to the many ways in which state and wider society have dominated low-income sectors" portraying civil

society as “complex mosaic of different interest”. However in his article ‘Neighborhood Activism among Homeowners as a Politics of Space’, Purcell exposes the limits of using a single social category as the motto of urban activism, as it implies limiting to an approach that won’t reveal the complexity of the political nature of the neighborhood. He further states that to better understand that complexity, you need a spatial perspective as key to understand people’s agenda and why they don’t dream about an ideal future city but claim the real city they want. According to him “This spatial approach can understand the interconnected role played by class, race, gender, nature, and the like”, as well as the “motivation for activism comprehensively in terms of a mismatch between conceptual space and material space fused in everyday lived space.”²⁴

The neighbors of the district organized themselves to form the platform ‘Salvem el Cabanyal’ independently from class, gender, ethnicity or age, around a common claim for their Right to the City, to find spaces for subversive thinking and practices that can foster conditions of subordination against the oppressing forces. Independently from their individual needs and aspirations, they claim collectively against the oppression they suffer from local authorities who, by imposing their totalitarian view, will alter their lives in a significant way. They claim for what they consider a just city they deserve and for their right as citizens to decide on their neighborhood - they don’t have a romantic vision about a dream city.

The diversity of the different members of the community is reflected in the heterogeneity of the platform. The platform is formed by a very wide spectrum of the urban society like neighbors of different class, age, gender, retail shopkeepers, political parties, and cultural and educational institutions and one of its main objectives is to



Figure 7. Image of the demonstrations against the plan on January 2010.

encourage the active participation of all the neighbors in their very different activities. This different nature, needs and aspirations of its members has brought them together to work in coalition rather than in collaboration, in which every actor, with individual aspirations works together to in a collective action to obtain their own benefit through achieving common goals. The recognition of this difference can deepen the bonds between the members of the community and allows a space for negotiation that can open those identities to a new reconfiguration. The recognition of difference is not opposite to the collective as it creates a sense of solidarity, which is grounded not to what they have in common but that they aspire in common.²⁵ (Figure 7)

The association’s success²⁶ is grounded in the fact that it based on a very complex and holistic modus operandi, where a more radical form of social mobilization together with legal actions at an institutional level are engaged to other practices like knowledge dissemination, publicity in the media, international workshops, academic research, heritage and cultural conservation and education, horizontal national and international



Figure 8. Image of members of the platform 'Salvem el Cabanyal' during an exchange visit celebrated in Ottensen, Hamburg in 2004.



Figure 9. Image of the congress EN 3 BARRIOS held in El Cabanyal with the participation of representatives from Mujokima and Ottensen, Cabanyal, Ottensen, Mukojima in 2010.



Figure 10. Image of the diploma award of the 2013 Europa Nostra Awards in the category Education, training and awareness-raising

networks of knowledge exchange, and more alternative forms of art. This movement carries out a combination of traditional claims, whether legal or more radical in form of protest, together with very innovative and symbolic claims. The dynamic combination of all these different actions and the empowerment of the community from the active and critical engagement of their members through participation, solidarity and coalition, has currently managed to pause the project and has resisted so far the oppression of the local powers, reconfiguring the identities of all the players involved in this conflict. (Figures 8 and 9)

The success has been recently highlighted furthermore to an international level when the neighbors were awarded in the 2013 Europa Nostra Awards, the EU Prize for Cultural Heritage, under the category Education, training and awareness-raising for one of their initiatives, the project 'Living Cabanyal Archive'. According to the jury the project was awarded for representing an exemplary initiative of the engaged neighbors of El Cabanyal, who are aware of their responsibility towards their cultural heritage both at urban and social scales, and who have proved to show an array of different ways of raising awareness of the importance of their neighborhood by promoting inclusive town planning through cultural identity and active participation. (Figure 10).

The open museum

The most intriguing of the initiatives that 'Salvem el Cabanyal' has done is the art workshop 'Portes Obertes', a way of using art to reinforce neighbors' claim in their social struggle. Since 1998, every year for several weekends, the neighborhood turns into a large-scale live museum, where private houses are opened to public visitors as if they were exhibition halls, and artists that support the cause



Figure 11. Image of the promotional poster for the 2013 edition of 'Portes Obertes'.

show their works of art for free. This workshop has two very important goals: first it helps to reinforce the neighbors' identity promoting their participation and engagement in the initiative exposing their own houses, enhancing the collectiveness and cohesion of the community, and second, to show publicly the real conditions and characteristics of the neighborhood, hidden and manipulated by the local authorities and biased by the media. The initiative promotes the dialogue between the intimacy of the private space and the public sphere, as the domestic space is transformed into a public space and perceived as such by visitors. (Figure 11).

This was the traditional way of living of the people of 'El Cabanyal', as it used to be in the village back in time: mutual trust and closeness of neighbours whose houses always had their doors open and who occupied the streets and squares of their neighbourhood in their everyday life. This effect is complemented with the works of art shown inside the houses, which act not only as a museum, but is also a piece of art itself. The owners explain their interpretations of contemporary pieces of art, at the same time as these are merged with traditional and even sacred private objects of the house. This exchange of roles, together with the dialogue between artists, visitors, place and homeowners, opens up spaces for the reconfiguration of the existing relationships and coalitions in the



Figure 12. Image of the promotional poster for the 2011 edition of 'Portes Obertes'.

community, and thus can be the trigger for a the transformation of the existing power relations at a wider scale. This workshop has used art to promote the cohesion and identity of the community, while engaging other citizens and exposing the actual state and current problems of the neighbourhood, and highlighting its architectural and cultural heritage. (Figure 12)

CONCLUSION

The urban social movement headed by the platform 'Salvem el Cabanyal' is an example of how community action can manage to contest and stop a very aggressive urban plan that means the physical and social destruction of the whole neighborhood, encouraging the participation of the community. It has made new horizontal networks of knowledge exchange with other institutions and social movements encouraging these to engage in their own struggles. By using innovative initiatives and different artistic manifestations, it has managed to engage not only the participation of the community but to attract the rest of the civic society and show the conflict to the rest of the world. It has been able to reach a wider scale forming partnerships with other civil players and has managed to put together their differences in coalition to fight for their Right to the City, and to what they claim should be urban regeneration and not urban destruction. However, the major arguments in their claim are around the historical and cultural value of the neighborhood, more than around the social-economic problems that affect the district, on which, according to the local authorities, the need of that plan is grounded as they consider it essential to solve them. If they don't manage to overcome the 'aesthetification' of the conflict, the movement won't mean a real transformation of the existing structural conditions that caused the current problems in the neighborhood. In the event they won the fight against the authorities, it is very difficult to ensure that the empowered community will not end up replicating the unequal power relations with the ones whose voices were against the movement, or even more, with the ones whose voices were not even heard.

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