

From Rome to Modernity: Updating of Mediterranean City Centre through Urban Plot Analysis. Urban Renewal in Ciutat Vella, Valencia

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Abstract: Ciutat Vella, the current city centre of Valencia, represents its historic old town and the complete city till the 19th century. Initially a Roman settlement by Turia river banks founded in 238 BC, following historic moments extended the city involving Visigoth and Muslim occupations and the Christian re-conquest. Subsequent surrounding belts were formed along these periods and the flood, river centered plain by the Mediterranean coast favored an almost perfect fried-egg extension shape. In the 19th century first extensions of the city over the walls and their demolition promoted the first sanitation works into the walled city. Some great urban renewal in a Haussmannian way were executed in the 19th century – calle de la Paz – and in the 20th century – Avenida del Oeste – as well, updating the old town to modern times. By analyzing the urban plots surface and shape is possible to observe the urban genesis throughout the ages. In addition, the plot conformation made possible the final setting of those two bigger urban interventions among the existing city. In conclusion, Valencia becomes an almost urban prototype of historic urban growth in Northern Mediterranean.

1. Introduction

The principal, ultimate fact to draw the character of Valencia is its geographical location. It lays on the coastal Mediterranean plains in the area, where the periodical river floods created flat lowland to be controlled and rich soils for agricultural production as well. But these areas by the coast were unhealthy due to the existence of wide extensions of marshes and fens unable to be inhabited. That is the reason why the majority of human settlement by the Valencian coast are in fact inland settlements. And, in addition, the inland river banks were chosen for that proposal.

Deepening into the hydrographic system, among the series of rivers coming from the center of the Iberian Peninsula (historic Castille) to the Valencian coast, *Turia* River in the centre and *Xúquer* River a little further to the south are the main water streams in the region. In addition, *Turia* River is on the geometrical bisector of Valencian gulf. So, Valencia, as many of the ancient cities on this coastal strip, were established on the river banks at least 6 km from the coast line.

On the other hand, the historic issues complete Valencia foundation to be understood. According to archaeologist researches there was a strategical reason for the Roman foundation of

Valentia. The Romans decided to create a disturbing third urban centre in the area, in order to compete with two former Iberian tribal centres in *Arse* (Roman *Saguntum* and current *Sagunt*) and *Leiria* (roman *Edeta* and current *Llíria*). Both of them, continuously fighting for the territory hegemony were stopped in their proposals by the Roman conquerors.

As a brief historical overview, after the Roman foundation in 238 BC Valentia started to grow and became the main centre to the South of the capital city of *Tarraco* (current *Tarragona*) in the *Tarraconensis* Roman province in Hispania. After the Roman Empire fell down, the city was shortly abandoned till the arrival of Northern Visigoth tribes, who re-founded it to become one of the main archdioceses in the East of the Visigoth Kingdom. In 711 the Muslim troops entered the Iberian Peninsula through Gibraltar strait, covering very quickly almost the whole part of it. So, *Valentia* became *Balānsiya* easily, becoming again the main urban centre in the East of Al-Andalus. Finally, the Christian conquest in 1238 was the origin of the creation of the Christian Kingdom of Valencia and the starting point for a forthcoming XIV gold century for the city. In that moment, Valencia became the biggest city in the Iberian Peninsula and the artistic centre of the Crown of Aragon. Thereby, Valencia was the main connection port to Aragon overseas territories in the Mediterranean, specially the Southern half of Italy, and reaching Greece and Aegean islands. The union of Castille and Aragon Crowns in 1492 represents the final point of the city slow decline to its third position into the country.

2. Analysis/Results

Different plot analysis regard the study of their size, their shape, their location into the blocks and, finally, their façade connections to the surrounding public spaces.

The starting point to the analysis treats the study of each one of the historic periods focusing on the plots following the four characteristic points described previously.

2.1. Roman diverted continuity

The Roman area of *Ciutat Vella* lays on its North-East quarter, around the cathedral. This is located in the same place where the main mosque of the Muslim city stayed, nearby the former Visigoth cathedral as well.

Beneath the existing city the Roman basements remain uncovered. Just only some parts from the most important buildings were discovered, such as the Circus, the Forum, or even parts of the *Cardō* and *Decumanus* main streets.

When the Roman city was abandoned, a thick layer of demolition materials was formed, blurring the urban alignments and plots. So, after the Visigoth re-foundation, new buildings and streets were drawn over the rubble in a certain reference to the ancient city bellow.

In this area blocks are quite different in size and shape, but there is a certain repeated geometry, proportions and size close to the rectangular series of the former Roman blocks. So, the studied size of the urban pattern draws a hypothetic rectangular block of 40x30 meters. The present blocks as a reflex that pattern bellow cover a range of measures between 90 to 30 meters long by 60 to 20 meters wide. Concerning the plots, the general shape is rectangular, with several variations in length and width, but with the constant presence of the right-angle. However, a repeated set of six plots per block can be observed in several blocks. So, as a synopsis, a prototype of Roman block can be defined as a rectangular shape composed of six plots in two main, long façades series of three buildings.

But, as said before, the Roman city was abandoned, demolished by plundering in pillages to obtain building materials, and finally re-founded on the rubble. An important part of former Roman buildings were reused, but the basements stay still near two meters deep under the present city.

2.2. Muslim inner heritage

The Muslim way of building an urban area can be observed in several parts of *Ciutat Vella*. A pattern of narrow, winding streets combined with big, green spaces in the courtyards into the blocks characterized almost a third of the city. In the natural edges by the Muslim walls specially can be observed a Muslim way to create urban space by a series of small irregular squares that articulate the urban pattern of the streets close to the walls.

In opposition to a more or less Roman continued existence that gave to Visigoth city a certain modulation, it is not possible to find a module or series into the formation of the Muslim area. This point reinforces the fact that the Roman city was enlarged by a new urban pattern from scratch: that is the real Muslim evidence. As there is no module into its genesis, there is no range of measures or geometries possible to be found.

In this area there is not a general pattern for block or plot shapes. Old buildings were built by their own, occupying non regular plots, forming blocks by addition of them. Every building had, on the other hand, different, inner free spaces as own courtyards that finally added diversity to the urban pattern. This scheme can be found in the outskirts of the Roman city. Due to such a lack of previous plan or geometry, there is no range of measures for neither the blocks nor the plots, as can be seen in the plan.

Concerning the plot shapes, in the same way than the urban pattern and the blocks, there is no serial sample and every plot is different as well.

2.3. Christian wide expansion

After the conquest in 1238 a new great wall surrounding the Muslim city was planned, covering more than the double in surface than the existing city. An ambitious program was developed by drying the Southern, smallest branch of the river in Muslim times to gain a huge new urban area.

The new walled city initially consists of the converted Muslim city extending connections to the main gates of the city walls, defining new streets. The space among these new radial streets and the wall was not occupied at a time. The final vacancy great areas to be filled in were built in the sixties, by replacing small, minor buildings into new residential modern blocks.

Those vacancy spaces were built while the Christian city was built, and show different urban patterns depending on different origins. Those nine main urban patterns –identified by local nearby names- can be described in detail from North-West to South-East following a line into that “Christian crescent” as follows:

1. *Soguers*: This is the first Northernmost area, and one of the latest to be built in a historic grove till 19th century. In that moment, a set of 4 blocks in a grided street pattern 70 m wide cover that vacancy space with some facilities for the city. Due to their measures they all were provided with large green spaces inside.
2. *Mercedaris*: The next adjacent area to the South lays on the northern side of one of the extended urban axis in the Christian city going out to the West, *carrer de Quart* coming from

carrer dels Cavallers (Knights' st). This street links Ciutat Vella's heart right to *Portal de Quart*, the second historic gate of Valencia in importance. The first one is *Portal de Serrans*, the northern gate in Muslim times that originated the old *carrer de Serrans*, the fringe street between Roman and Muslim cities going into Ciutat Vella from the North. This area is centered between the neo-gothic church of Mercedian Order from the 19th century and the west slope of the Christian wall. It is the last huge area to be occupied in Ciutat Vella in the 60s: new residential buildings composing huge blocks around 60 x 60 meters were built, in a total of 9 pieces.

3. *Velluters Nord*: Between *Portal de Quart* and the southern gates the mediaeval quarter of *Velluters* was developed. It was an area well watered by former irrigation ditches what decided the settlement of several craft workshop devoted to velvet (*vellut* in local language). In the northern side of all this area, just near *Portal de Quart* appears an homogeneous urban pattern in a grill sized 60 m long by 30 m wide, in horizontal composition East-West. As it has a mediaeval origin, shapes of both plots and block are not strictly regular.
4. *Velluters Sud*: On the other hand, the southern side of *Barri dels Velluters* is developed following a in a complete different urban pattern than that the adjacent northern one. A grill sized 60 m long by 40 m wide, but this time in a North-South location represents a pattern leading to southern gates of *Ciutat Vella*.
5. *Eix Boatella*: By the main gate of the Muslim city an outskirts area was settled called *Boatella* from Muslim times. It had a central axis extended progressively to South, creating a sort of long, North-South blocks around 70 m long by 50 m wide. This area fronts to the East to *carrer de Sant Vicent*, the ancient *Roma Via Augusta* going South. This is one of the longest streets in Valencia, and takes its name from the martyr's path of the saint in Lower Empire Roman times.
6. *Sant Pau*: West of *carrer de Sant Vicent* lays another urban pattern, different to the previous one, with some block 70 m long by 30 m wide in an East-West situation. This area, next to the first enlargement plans in Valencia, *Primer Eixample*, was quite redesigned by building substitutions.
7. *Barri dels Peixcadors*: One of the oldest urban areas of the Christian town was this, the area where several fishermen's houses were located in connection to a water channel linking to the river. This area disappeared in one of the first huge urban transformations of the old town by the beginning of the 20th century. Four great blocks were built in the area where modest, smaller 30x20 m blocks existed. A certain outline of them was extended West and can be observed in still present blocks.
8. *Universitat*: A central area West to the Muslim city is characterized by an urban grill sized 50x30 m East to West location, and some blocks around these measures still stay from the Renaissance ages, when the city had a hard connection to artistic streams throughout its trade links with Italy.
9. *Sant Bult*: The Easternmost area between Muslim and Christian walls corresponds to a suburb out of the Muslim city, renamed after the conquest as *Barri de Sant Bult*. A higher spontaneous urban pattern from mediaeval times shows some blocks 70x25 m in both North-South and East-West situations.

As described above, those nine different urban patterns completed the Christian city, the final extension of Valencia Old Town till the 19th century. On the other hand, along this century arrived to Valencia the increasing streams of urban refurbishments following Haussmann works in Paris.

The increasing population in the city by the 19th century changed the living conditions into the walled area. Even though the street pattern lasted over time, the buildings started to be replaced by taller ones in storeys and deeper ones into the block. These changes produced an overcrowded built reality where living conditions on sunlighting and ventilation were gradually worst.

In parallel to sanitation and public health reasons, urban refurbishments into city centres were an indispensable condition for the cities to have an approval in their extensions plans in Spain, or *Planes de Ensanche*. As in many other cases, the plans to enlarge the city of Valencia over the walls had to include refurbishment plans for its inner city.

There are two main interventions covering the whole period of reforms into the city. Those are the opening of *calle de la Paz* in the 19th century, and *avinguda de l'Oest* in the mid of 20th century. Both them follow Haussmann criteria of intervention by opening hard lines throughout the existing city. Those plans were possible due to the geometry of the existing plots and blocks built in the city through centuries, as seen before. Thus, an analysis of the urban genesis in both interventions shed light on the importance of the existing city and the geometry of former blocks and plots. In addition, the listed buildings in both areas are the ultimate reality to support the planned lines.

In a detailed comparison of both interventions, as shown in the figure, the historic areas of old town are completely recognizable. The 19th century intervention –*calle de la Paz*– was open on the fringe area between Roman and Muslim cities, and the sizes of the blocks and the existence of listed buildings talk about the high heritage level in the area. And in the other case, the 20th century intervention –*avinguda de l'Oest*– was initially opened but never completed as the whole plan established crossing the entire city. In addition, the greater sizes of the blocks and



Figure 1.



Figure 2.

the lower number of listed buildings talk about a newer area into city centre than the other one. Its characteristics describe the mediaeval urban pattern built in *Barri dels Velluters* into the Christian city.

3. Conclusion

After this general overview focusing on the main cases of urban morphological genesis in Valencia *Ciutat Vella* and the main interventions on urban renewal, two clarifying conclusions appear as a summary. The first, basic conclusion is the fact that attending the study of plots and their aggrupation into blocks the evidence of the city formation into historical periods can be heavily recognized.

On the second hand, the case of Valencia represents a near centric circles scheme built throughout the history in a “fried-egg scheme”. Into this concept, the Roman city settlement is the central egg yolk, the Muslim embracing ring around it is the egg-white side and the final bigger Christian crescent city and walls are the outermost perimeter side of this *fried-egg* scheme.

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