
2. On determining the guidelines for the model of current urban growth affecting Spanish main urban agglomerations

In the last few years, on account of recent processes of technological innovation, the universalisation of car ownership, and the cheapening of transport costs, the territorial model of the most developed countries has undergone a sea change from one of compact areas characteristic of classic metropolitan areas to another one of the **diffuse city**. Of the terms proposed, the most widely accepted are “urban sprawl”, which refers to an undeniable reality in most western urban agglomerations.

There can be no denying that this process of dispersed expansion has been spreading over the last few years in European urban agglomerations taken as a whole. What is less clear—or at least is the subject of stimulating debate—is the rhythm at which this phenomenon is taking place, depending on whether the country in question is from the north of Europe or the Mediterranean region. For some scholars, the Latin-Mediterranean and Anglo-Saxon models of suburbanisation will now tend to converge in a single model of reticulated, “centre-less city” common to the whole of Europe. But for others, the distinctive character of Mediterranean urbanism, which has been compact and concentrated for centuries, has left its definitive mark on the city, only recently permitting the restricted incorporation of certain features of the diffuse model. On this view we are faced with a phenomenon of urban de-concentration which avails itself of secondary peripheral centres—themselves developed in the phase of metropolitan conformation—as bulwarks of diffuse growth.

Accordingly, it may reasonably be claimed that a fair part of the changes that have taken place in European cities bring to mind developments in North American cities some decades earlier—developments which started to make themselves felt in Spain's urban agglomerations some time ago.

In line with the data obtained from our research, the dominant features of the dispersed city that have appeared in our chief metropolises may be resumed as follows:

a) The contradiction of the dispersed model of current urbanisation: limited population growth versus exponential development of space occupied by city

In the early stages of the conformation of the metropolitan model, overall demographic growth was rapid and intense because the concentration of employment led to a massive exodus from the countryside to the city, while the economy opened up to the outside world and industry became modernised.

This process tended to modify some of its defining features, opening the way for the Anglo-Saxon model of growth with new territorial structures characterised by low residential density in single-family houses and the decentralisation of some tertiary functions, served by road systems and endowed with extensive open areas—all after the manner of urban dispersion and the generation of “new peripheries”.

b) Development of extensive residential fabric. An emerging feature of the diffuse city

The proliferation of single-family dwellings on the periphery of our cities has been one of the most visible characteristics of the new age for more than two decades and has brought about the appearance in the suburbs of one of the most striking features of the dispersed city.

c) Post-Fordian restructuring of industry

The profound changes registered by Spain's metropolises on the coat tails of post-Fordism make up a major element of industrial organisation along new lines and are in harmony with the dispersed city model. The outcome of change in the productive model at the level of the territory has been highly

varied due to a diversity of planning strategies and strategies regarding the location of the new industrial sites in line with the needs of the newly emerging industrial fabric (new quality industrial spaces and smaller-sized industrial estates).

d) Peripheral location of previously centralised activities

One of the features of Spanish cities which is easiest to observe is precisely that, the location on the new peripheries of activities which were previously located in the city centres (commerce, offices).

e) The metropolitan structure of peripheral sub-centres; the support offered by peripheral location for tertiary uses

In the purest form of dispersed city, the decentralised location of tertiary function in the new peripheries is achieved by the creation of specific suburban centres. However, this state of affairs is hard to find on the periphery of our major cities. It would be more exact to say that one of the characteristics of Spanish cities is the availability of a cluster of peripheral urban centres which sprang up during the conformation of the metropolitan model and which nowadays serve as sub-centres which attract tertiary activities and have evident potential for territorial articulation.

f) A new model of demand for urban mobility in Spain's new and current model of diffuse city

The new model whereby activity is dispersed throughout the territory has given rise to increasingly complex urban structures which require the articulation increasingly less connected and more fragmented spaces. The decentralisation of facilities and companies (technology and business parks, peripheral shopping centres, universities, etc.) increases the demand for mobility and this means an extensive network of urban roads and motorways has to be built across the territory.

Towards a Spanish model of dispersed city?

In view of the foregoing analysis, it is possible to confirm the current existence of profound structural changes affecting the urban organisation of our cities. In our opinion, events in the last few years verify a group of fundamental transformations which are leading Spain's most highly developed metropolises towards a more dispersed model of urban activities. That in no way means a firm answer can be given to the question of whether the process under way will proceed according to the purest form of the North American model. Rather, the contrary seems to be the case in so far as particular features of the diffuse city model are appearing in the urban structure of Spanish cities but under the sign of the urban culture of the compact, Mediterranean city.

More information in:

Azcárate Luxán, M.V. ; Cocero Matesanz, D. ; Fernández Fernández, A. ; García Lázaro, F.J. ; Muguruza Cañas, C. and Santos Preciado, J.M. (2008): "*Rasgos fundamentales del reciente proceso de urbanización difusa. Algunas reflexiones sobre la realidad de la ciudad dispersa en las aglomeraciones urbanas españolas*", en *Comunicaciones al XI Coloquio Ibérico de Geografía. La perspectiva geográfica ante los nuevos retos de la sociedad y el medio ambiente en el contexto ibérico* (Alcalá-Pastrana, 1-4 octubre 2008).

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