

“For sale: empty Spain”

Raising awareness on abandoned buildings and depopulated villages

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Topic: T2.1. Research in heritage education

Abstract

Population density is one of the most influential factors in the conservation of historic vernacular buildings. This factor is not directly linked with the constructive technique used but with the conservation and abandonment of traditional buildings. Since the mid-20th century many rural areas in the Iberian Peninsula, mostly inland, have suffered a loss of population. This is partly due to the start of industrialization which caused the population to move to the cities, as well as the high levels of poverty and abandonment in small inland towns which remain very isolated, even today. It is in this context that the Empty Spain teaching initiative arises, applicable to architectural preservation subjects taught at the ETS of Architecture (Universitat Politècnica de València, Spain), and encouraged by the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda promoted by United Nations. Raising awareness on global issues affecting society is essential in the awareness of social responsibility in education. This is even more the case for any professionals in training, especially architects, directly involved in key decisions on forms of construction and choice of materials. From the start it was felt that this involvement could help shape the framework needed to prompt motivation and undertake the changes to follow.

Keywords: architectural conservation; learning by doing; resilience of historic buildings.

1. Introduction

The area known as *La España vacía* (“empty Spain”) or *La España vaciada* (“emptied Spain”) includes agriculture-dependent regions in the vast interior of the country. Therefore, Madrid, Barcelona and Bilbao represent dynamic and adaptable zones, while a large part of Andalusia, Extremadura, Castilla y León, Aragon and Castilla La Mancha is considered representative of depopulated Spain (Modenes-López Colas, 2014). These territories missed the development wave of the larger cities, the speedy industrialization and the specific tourist-friendly coast enjoyed in the later years of the Franco dictatorship. The lack of coasts and possible associated

resources is one of the main causes of historic depopulation. What was the result? This disparity encouraged migration, especially that of younger generations, to the metropolises, further accentuating the rural-urban division (Fig.1 and 2).

In recent decades the statistics have made for stark reading: only 10 percent of Spain’s population inhabits 70 percent of the country. Forty-two percent of villages and towns are at risk of depopulation.

The province of Zamora, in the region of Castile and León, has seen its population drop by over 30 percent since 1975, while according to recent research featured in “The Guardian” the

population of the Balearic Islands has doubled (Jones, 2019). These data made Spanish society aware of the problems in rural areas and empty Spain has become a popular phrase in political debate and the media. However, the frustration still remains as the actual policies are not changing.

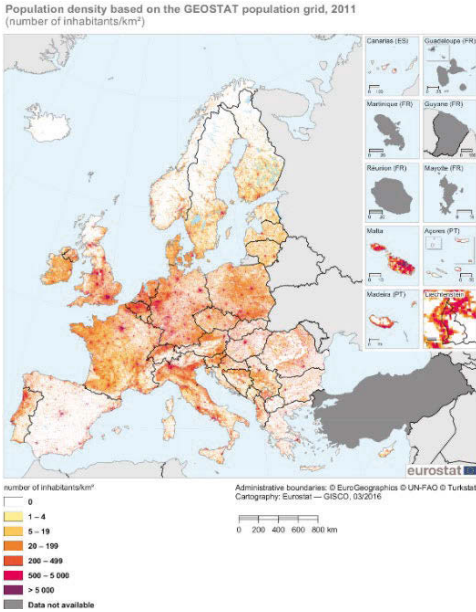


Fig. 1. Details about Population density in Europe (Geostat).

2. The role of vernacular buildings in depopulated areas

Vernacular architecture is an essential part of the concept of peninsular culture, especially in depopulated areas, both for its remote origin and different techniques, adapted to natural and cultural surroundings. In addition, despite their intrinsic resilience, historic building techniques have gradually disappeared, been abandoned or replaced by new standardized techniques, especially from the mid-20th century (Langeveld, 2013). This was to the result of a process stemming from a lack of knowledge and the rejection of this traditional architecture, considered to be poor quality and linked to underdevelopment (Fig. 3-4). For all these reasons it is important to analyse factors directly linked to architecture and certain special techniques (Mileto et al., 2019) in order to identify possible responses to these problems from a wide perspective including multi-risk vulnerability factors of depopulation (Mileto et al., 2020).

Against this backdrop, in order to raise further awareness on this issue, the authors have organized an exhibition which includes a selection of interesting case studies about

The population in much of rural Spain is falling

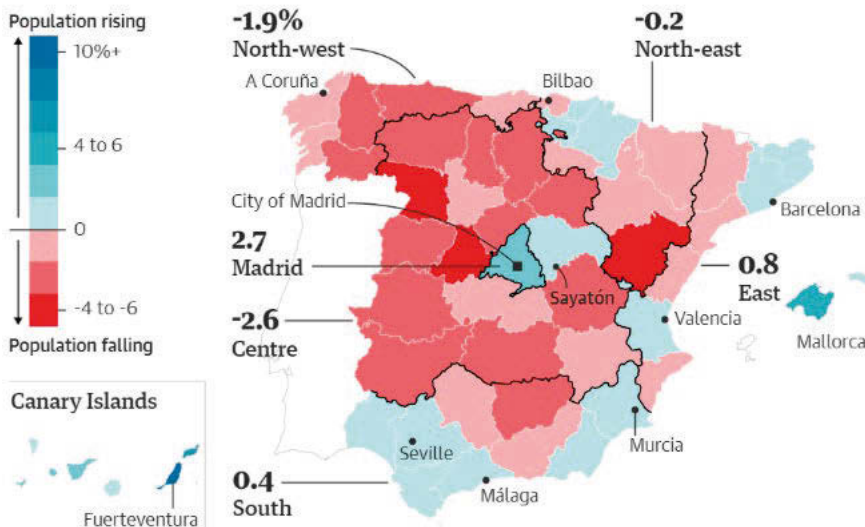


Fig. 2. Population density in Spain (The Guardian/Eurostat).

abandoned buildings in rural areas (Baró et al., 2022). The surveys and details of the case studies are drawn up by students in the subject of Architectural Conservation and PhD candidates involved in depopulation topics at the Higher Technical School of Architecture. This initiative is included within the Versus+ Heritage for People European research project in which researchers from Universitat Politècnica de València, Escola Superior Gallaecia (Portugal), Università degli Studi di Firenze (Italy), Università degli Studi di Cagliari (Italy) and the International Center for Earthen Architecture CRAterre de Grenoble (France) take part.

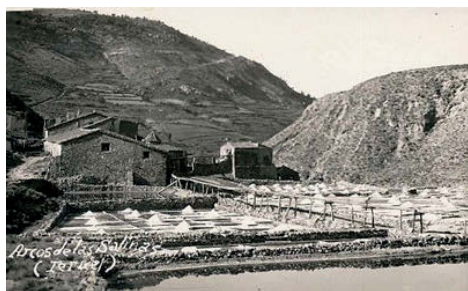
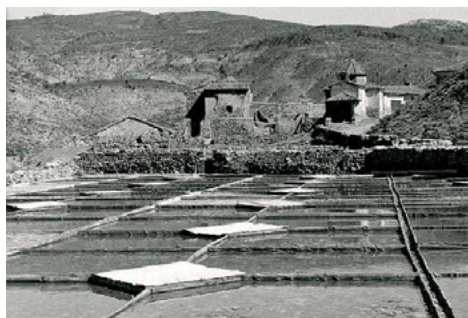


Fig. 3-4. Examples of former rural ensemble of buildings in the “Empty Spain”: Arcos de la Salinas (salt marshes, now abandoned) in Aragon (Source: Archive M. Calvo).

3. “For sale: empty Spain” initiative

In Empty Spain, as in other marginal rural areas in Europe, there is an extremely high number of abandoned and underused buildings in a state of conservation which is considered to be “at breaking point” despite their potential (Walkers et al., 2004). Without considering numbers, one can think of many examples in the territory of

buildings considered iconic within the constructive culture of the Iberian Peninsula. In terms of rural residential buildings alone, different types of farmhouses (cortijos, haciendas, masías, alquerías, caseríos...) can be listed. At the same time, in most cases to this we must add production spaces such as mills, oil presses, stables, sawmills, farms, kilns, slaughterhouses, wash houses, etc., which due to their preindustrial status have become obsolete and in many cases been abandoned (AA.VV., 2014).

On a territorial level depopulation has also affected the loss of social and urban fabric of small villages, where spaces for worship and social gathering have progressively joined the blurred image of an architecture “without architects” but also “without inhabitants”. Faced with the impossibility of quantifying this immovable heritage in the framework of the initiative, students have been set the task of selecting a case study of Empty Spain, close to their family or cultural surroundings, providing detailed definitions of all architectural characteristics, taking into consideration whether or not conservation intervention actions had been carried out in recent times.

There is a vast amount of building stock in Empty Spain (Poza & Fernandez, 2010). In many cases these buildings can be accessed safely, have been on sale for years, awaiting a return to a respectful use and dignified purpose, mostly given their resilience and relative “good conditions” in terms of conservation, despite decades of abandonment (Aghas et al., 2013).

According to the official definition of the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction resilience is “the ability of a system, community or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, accommodate to and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner, including through the preservation and restoration of its essential basic structures and functions” (AA.VV., 2015b).

The close relationship between vernacular buildings and resilience was first stressed more than twenty-five years ago (Oliver, 2006):

“vernacular dwellings and buildings are related to their environmental context and available resources, they are customarily owner or community built, utilizing traditional technologies.

All forms of vernacular architecture are built to meet specific needs, accommodating the values, economics and ways of living of the cultures that produce them”. Oliver’s description points out the existence of numerous parameters in the constitution of a special local building culture, above

4. Proposing concrete actions for conservation and reuse

In the framework of Sustainable Development Goals of the new 2030 Agenda promoted by the United Nations (AA.VV., 2015a) the authors organized students into groups of 5 or 6 and set the task of tracking the affected areas to identify buildings of interest for this initiative (Fig. 5-6). For the smooth running of the work, the case study must feature traditional techniques which are as clearly exposed as

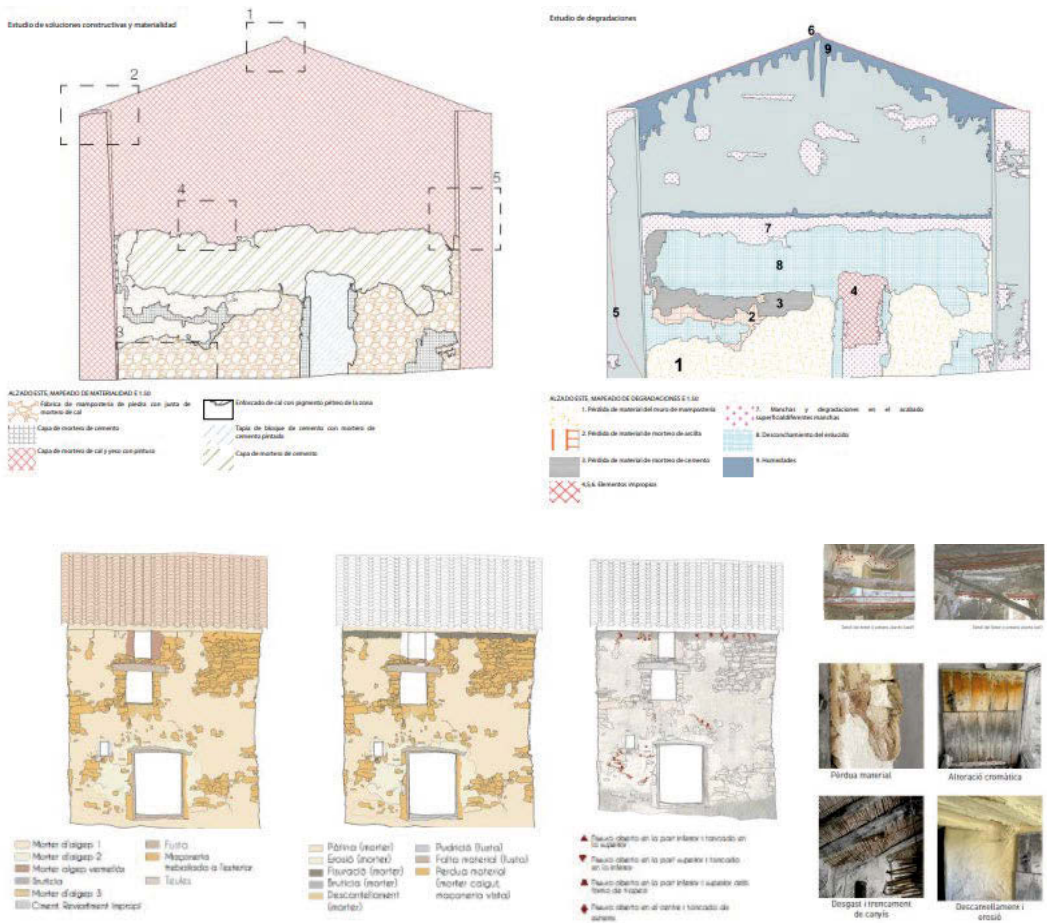


Fig.5-6 Extract from the study undertaken concerning abandoned buildings in Architectural Conservation subject. (Source: Belenguier, Colomar, Pozzi, Lara, Soriano).

all the role of the ‘micro-climate’ and various environmental conditions that other authors explored decades before (Rudofsky, 1964).

possible, a degree of deterioration (non-restored construction but with no safety issues) and be small enough for in-depth study.

As these are architecture students the obvious action is to draw up a preliminary project applied to the building studied.

This design develops architectural proposals with the firm conviction that the recovery of built legacy is possible and desirable, with no need to compromise on the current demands of living standards or to sacrifice the picturesque charm of popular architecture (Ozel et al., 2014).

First and foremost, the proposal requires a selection of criteria or rules on which to base the actions. The different restoration theories covered in the theoretical part of the subject provide the basis for this selection. The students must also set objectives and intentions prior to the initial decision-making.

The project itself includes three complementary aspects: the solutions provided for the degradation phenomena and structural pathologies (Fig. 7); the adaptation of the building to a specific but not necessarily different use; and finally, the improvement of habitability conditions without compromising the values of the building (Weber & Yannas, 2013).



Fig.7 Study of degradation phenomena and structural pathologies (Source: Authors).

5. Discussion and conclusions

Following a group discussion of all the buildings and case studies analysed it was concluded that they are all affected by variables such as depopulation, geographical dispersion in the territory, functional obsolescence, and in general, problems with specialized labour and know-how during maintenance and/or interventions.

This initiative is not intended to be exhaustive given that, as stated above, it is impossible to quantify the number of buildings which could be included in a study of this kind. However, the value of this proposal lies in the awareness raised among students and indirectly, among the private individuals, communities or administrations who own these buildings (Fig. 8).

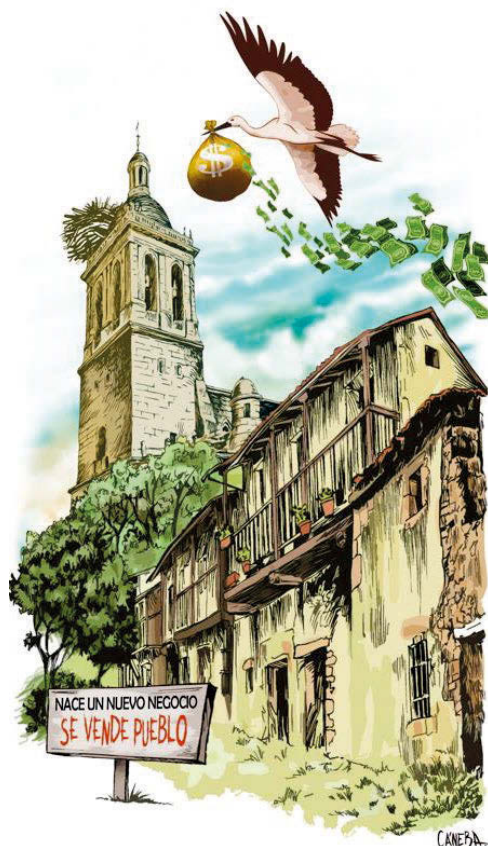


Fig.8 Example of social satire about depopulation (Source: ABC Economía/Caneba).

As a discipline architecture cannot solve the issue of depopulation and the crises affecting territorial models. However, actions like this proposal contribute to implementing a true strategy for multi-functional and sustainable rural development which is linked to very specific controlled incentives to entrepreneurs, boosting sectors which have not yet been suitably developed, such as those of restoration at local level, artisan labour and the traditional know-how of construction.

Acknowledgments

This paper has been possible thanks to the initiative “UPV_PC_ACTS 2022 Propuestas Culturales de Arte, Ciencia, Tecnología y Sociedad” and in the frame of project “VerSus+ | Heritage for PEOPLE” (financed by Creative Europe Programme) and project “RISK-Terra. Earthen architecture in the Iberian Peninsula: study of natural, social and anthropic risks and strategies to improve resilience” (funded by Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities).

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