

# **CHANGING CONTEXTS AND VISIONS FOR PLANNING: THE CASE OF MADRID CENTRAL AREA**

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How to cope with the concept of scarcity as an issue for planning? What does it imply for a traditional planning system based on a set of instruments aimed at guiding the city in the long term? To what extent does a master plan have the capacity to deal with the issue of scarcity? How can these plans be successful - or not - in this attempt? In which way does the changing economic and social context influence the type of planning pushed forward by the authorities in charge of the matter?

This article tries to give some answers to these questions by exploring the interplay which exists between the overall economic context, the dominant vision in planning, and the planning instruments produced for cities affected by changing circumstances, drawing on the master plans designed for Madrid during the last 30 years. The article is structured around these three key aspects, with the aim to extract some lessons from this experience. The laboratory used to explore these questions is the central district of the city. It is an urban realm to which all the approved planning instruments have given a special treatment to improve a traditionally deprived area, whatever their supportive vision.

## **A BRIEF VIEW ON THE CHANGING MADRILENIAN CONTEXTS AND THE ASSOCIATED PLANNING VISIONS**

### **The past**

Conversely to the rest of Europe, the effects of the 1973 oil crisis had a late impact in Spain, affecting its economy only at the end of the 1970's. As regards planning, this period coincides with the drawing up of the first master plan for the city under the democratic period. The critical economic situation led to the adoption of a shrinking vision in planning, according to which Madrid was facing a process of stagnation. By that time, the focus was placed on the need to complete the city edges and to attribute special care to the existing urban tissues, particularly its central area, characterised by strong urban decay.

### **The present**

Immediately after the approval of the 1985 master plan the first symptoms of the end of the economic crisis emerged, a fact that gave place to a new planning vision, based on an expansive image of the city, open to unexpected opportunities. The mandatory review of the existing plan gave rise to the need to produce a new planning instrument for the city. The principles of the Master Plan approved in 1997 were quite the opposite of the previous one: the need to offer enough land to capture investment implied a renewed interest in focussing the planning action on



**Figure 2-7 Historic Centre delimitation, 1885 master plan. Source: Area of Urbanism and Housing, Madrid City Council.**

huge peripheral growth proposals.

### **The future**

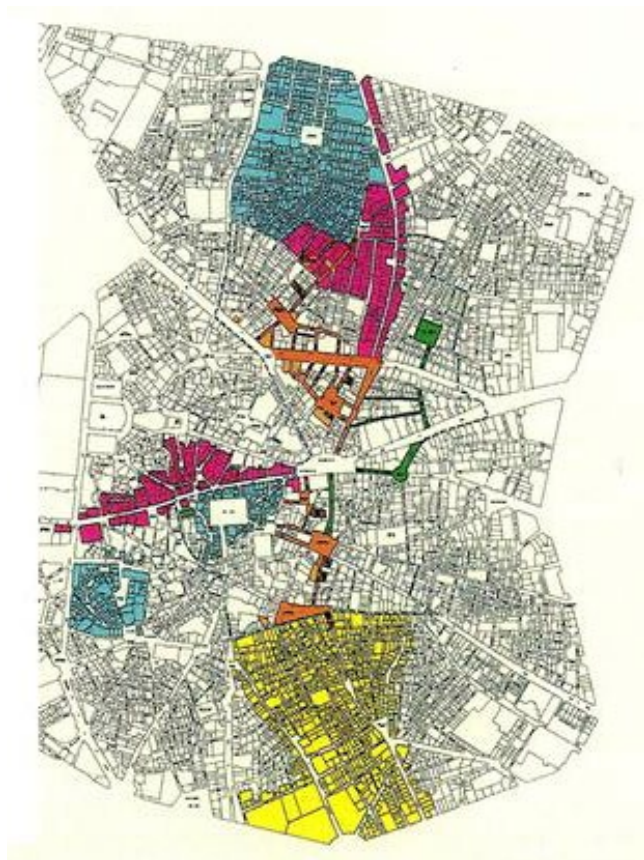
The global economic recession initiated in 2007 pushed the Spanish economy to the worst possible scenario due to, among other motives, its strong dependency on real estate investments promoted by the previous economic model and favoured by a planning practice adjusted to the principles of the expansive vision. The revision of the current master plan – in progress at present and estimated to be approved by 2014 – is being developed yet again under the scarcity vision. It includes new principles based not only on the recovery of the existing urban fabric and of the powerful dynamism of the central area expanding towards the periphery, but also on the need to move the existing local planning practice towards new ways of dealing with urban needs.

### **THE SHRINKING VISION: THE 1985 MASTER PLAN**

Accordingly to the recession that led the country to economic stagnation, the professional team in charge of drawing up the master plan for Madrid adopted as the leading principle the no growth principle. It centred the attention on the existing city, mainly the Historic Centre, an area consisting of 350 hectares, 5,000 dwellings and 130,000 inhabitants. By that time, the urban state of this area deserved a profound treatment to improve its existing conditions (see Figure 2 7).

There were two planning objectives for the central area of the city:

- \* Recovery of underused space, such as the Railway Green Corridor project, a strip of almost 7 km at the fringe of the central area, aimed to enhance the living conditions of the deprived neighbourhoods settled along the railway track.



**Figure 2-8 Areas of Preferential Rehabilitation and interventions with European Funds. Source: Area of Urbanism and Housing, Madrid City Council.**

\* Rehabilitation of the urban fabric, by means of launching special ordinances and of an ample catalogue of urban elements protected under the label of urban heritage.

Except for few actions, the outcomes of those proposals were scarce, in fact only few actions were undertaken, resulting in a progressive deterioration of the district. The cause behind this failure was obvious: the proposals implied too much economic effort for a single municipality in times of scarcity.

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The 1990's gave a new opportunity for the historic centre, when two positive factors coincided in time and space. In the first place, an inter-administrative protocol of cooperation was signed by the three levels of administration - state, region and local - to finance the rehabilitation of the capital city central district, a fact that gave birth to a new approach to planning: the selection of specific target areas articulated by squares and streets operating as neighbourhood centres of urban activities, called Areas of Preferential Rehabilitation. Secondly, the City Council had the possibility to apply for some European funds, aimed at the regeneration of urban environments, which gave the opportunity to improve the most depressed neighbourhood of the central district, as well as some selected urban itineraries (see Figure 2 8). This experience was internationally



**Figure 2-9 Urban improvements in residential and commercial areas. Source: Teresa Franchini.**

recognised, in 1998 when it was ranked as Best in the Habitat Best Practices Award; and in 1999 when Europa Nostra recognised the value of the activities taken by the local administration for the recovery of the built heritage (see Figure 2 9 and Figure 2 10).

### **Some lessons to be learnt**

Pros:

- \* Political decision: the alignment of multi-administrative levels to recover the dynamic of the capital city central area is a key factor in that matter
- \* Integrated instead of scattered actions: isolated rehabilitation is a slow process that does not prevent urban decay
- \* Strategic selection of the areas of intervention: the betterment and renewal of certain streets and squares is essential to trigger private investments in the surrounding areas
- \* Social and economic perception: the improvement of the urban scene, mainly the public realm, generates a highly satisfactory reaction from the citizenship.

Cons:

- \* Gentrification process: the lack of public initiatives to redress the economic logic of the owners of the dwellings affects the situation of tenants and users.
- \* Partial rehabilitation: except for those selected areas in which the administration has taken special care, not all dwellings of the central area were rehabilitated.

### **THE EXPANSIVE VISION: THE 1997 MASTER PLAN**

Soon after the launch of the 1985 master plan, the Spanish productive structure started to show the first signs of expected recovery, changing progressively the previous shrinking vision towards



**Figure 2-10 Urban improvements in residential and commercial areas. Source: Teresa Franchini.**

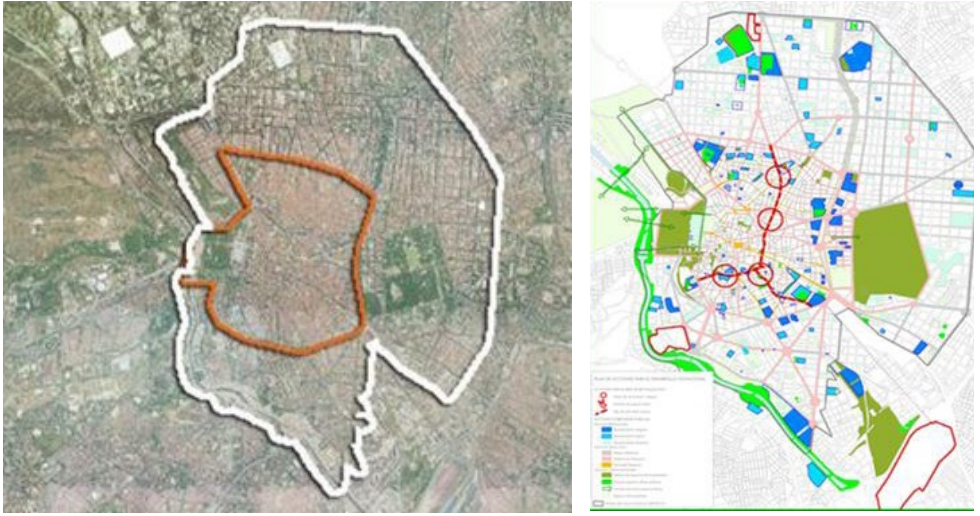
a new one, based on the expectation of an unprecedented dynamism that later put the country among the leading European economies. At the beginning of the 1990's the building activities, transformed into the leading productive sector of the country, found the proper conditions for its expansion, and demanded the greatest possible flexibility of the existing urban regulations, thus favouring the beginning of an important process of planning deregulation.

The master plan for Madrid adopted in 1997 followed the general tendency and concentrated its attention on the urban expansion. The new plan enlarged the central area to 523 hectares, 91,000 dwellings and 320,000 inhabitants - giving it a new denomination, the Central District (see Figure 2 11).

For this area two lines of actions were proposed:

- \* New areas for Integrated Rehabilitation, following the positive results of the previous experience
- \* Strategic Plan for the Revitalisation of the Central District (2004), drawn up by an ad-hoc administrative body - the Central Area Office - in charge of promoting the dynamism of the central city district (see Figure 2 12).

Among the projects proposed to fulfil this aim, one is standing out. It is the mega undertaking called Manzanares River Project (2004-2011), launched with the aim to recover this unique and hidden natural element for the city, a narrow stream of water that crosses the city from north to south, flanked since the 1970's by one of the inner rings road, which would provide a new urban axis to interconnect the adjoining neighbourhoods. Two objectives were set out for this purpose: the environmental restoration of the river banks, including the burying of some stretches of the ring road, the design of a linear park on the recovered land, and the urban renewal of the adjacent districts (see Figure 2 13, Figure 2 14, Figure 2 15 and Figure 2 16).



**Figure 2-11 (left) Historic Centre, 1997 master plan. Source: Area of Urbanism and Housing, Madrid City Council. Figure 2-12 (right) Strategic Plan for the CD Revitalisation, 2004. Specific projects. Source: Area of Urbanism and Housing, Madrid City Council.**

The project implied the burying of 8 km of highways, the treatment of 120 ha of urban land and the delivery of 50 ha for new green areas, all included in a budget of 4,100 million euros. The project was put in motion in spite of the heavy indebtedness it implied for the City Council, a situation that can only be understood in relation to the buoyant local economy existing at that time. It is expected that the citizenship will be paying this urban improvement over the next thirty years.

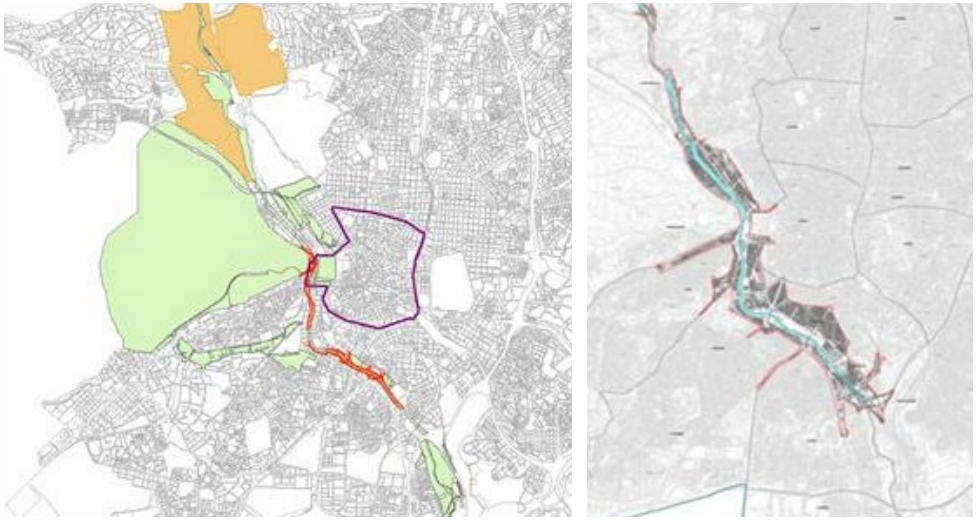
### **Some lessons to be learnt**

#### **Pros:**

- \* City marketing: political decision to put the city on the international map through big urban projects
- \* Political leadership: importance of personal involvement of the political leaders, mainly the Mayor, in the developing of certain key urban projects
- \* Social and economic perception: the improvement of the urban quality of life as a highly positive factor for ordinary people and businesses, let alone the recognition of efforts by the local administration in the matter
- \* Ad-hoc administrative bodies: the establishment of working teams in charge of specific projects, outside the current administrative system, facilitates not only the decision making process but the political discourse around them.

#### **Cons:**

- \* Environmental, social and financial tensions generated by the project management: this is the case of Manzanares River Project, due to lack of environmental reports, political transparency and public participation to decide about the expected results and budgets committed
- \* Limited outcomes in dwellings rehabilitation: except for a few cases, the process is left to private initiative.



**Figure 2-13 (left) and Figure 2-14 (right) Manzanares River Project, location and area of interventions.**  
**Source: Area of Urbanism and Housing, Madrid City Council.**

## **THE SCARCITY VISION: THE MASTER PLAN 2014**

The 2008 global crisis strongly affected the Spanish economy, dragging the country into a depression that continues today. The national economic base, mainly supported by the strong building industry consolidated during the expansive period, has showed its incapacity to meet the present social and economic demands. In planning terms, the new reality wiped out the previous vision based on urban growth aimed to satisfy the speculative real estate market, to give room to a new approach based on the satisfaction of the urban needs in a scarcity period. Facing this situation and after almost 15 years of implementation, the City Council has begun the process of drafting a new master plan based on the principle of recycling the existing city according to criteria of flexibility and innovation. At present this process is at the stage of preliminary studies and proposals, intending to complete final version of the plan by 2014.

For the central area – known as the Central Almond, an enlarged area of 5,070 hectares, 530,000 dwellings and 1,075,000 inhabitants - the Central Area Office delivered a Strategic Project in 2011, putting forward a new conceptual approach for an area that is seen as the urban engine in times of scarcity. For this proposal three key aspects were treated: quality of public space - understood as the most effective level to act on city transformation -, energy efficiency and climate change awareness, and sustainability principles to underpin the evolution of the urban tissues (see Figure 2 17).

Being a strategic proposal based on the value of urban recycling, it includes several sectoral strategies. The most significant one from the planning point of view is the one that proposes a brand new vision for spatial organisation and managerial treatment of the Central Area. In contrast to the traditional way of dealing with the urban tissue, based on zoning and regulatory ordinances, the proposal contains three innovative instruments which require the same innovative attitude from the City Council for its implementation. The project has been awarded as Best Applied Research at the XVIII Ibero-American Biennale of Architecture and Planning, Cadiz, Spain, 2012



**Figure 2-15 (left) and Figure 2-16 (right) Manzanares River Project: Linear Park and urban rehabilitation.**

**Source: Teresa Franchini**

### **New areas for planning management**

The Central Almond is divided into 24 Areas of Homogeneous Identity (AHI) that is, zones with similar physical, social and economic characteristics. The implementation of this proposal implies the removal of the current administrative division composed of 7 districts and 47 neighbourhoods (see Figure 2 18).

### **New way to describe the central area**

In order to facilitate the understanding of this complex territory, the central area is divided into so called Urban Cells (UC), composed of several blocks that constitute the basic unit of urban articulation. Each cell acts as a reference of identity for residents, stressing thereby the sense of belonging of every particular piece within the city mosaic (see Figure 2 19 and Figure 2 20).

Apart from this, the UC intends to be a singular planning element and a place for the promotion of innovation in terms of normative, density and hybridisation of uses. Within the cell, the inner streets are transformed into channels of pedestrian movements while the public transport system runs along a grid of approximately 400 x 400 meters. The location of new uses is proposed within the existing blocks for the hybridisation of uses, opening the private areas to the public. Public facilities are located on the UC fringes, taking advantage of the existing public means of transportation in the external streets. The implementation of this new urban organization demands a progressive process of inner restructuration to be fulfilled in the long term.

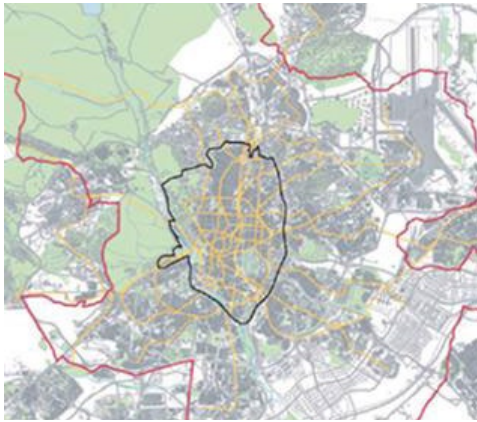
### **78 New regulatory criteria**

For the planning regulation, that is, the norms to be applied in each UC, the proposal contains two levels of intervention: the definition of global planning parameters for the entire AHI net, and detailed plans for every UC, intended to facilitate the administrative process of obtaining building permits. To put the whole regulatory system into practice, the implementation of the new criteria will imply the steady replacement of the existing ordinances and accordingly, the current bureaucratic process (see Figure 2-21).

### **Some lessons to be learnt**

Pros:

- \* New approach to regulatory planning practice: the revision of a current planning instrument gives the opportunity to apply new visions for planning and a new culture for administrative practice



**Figure 2-17 (left) The Central Almond: a new central area for planning. Source: Area of Urbanism and Housing, Madrid City Council. Figure 2-18 (right) Areas of Homogeneous Identity. Source: Madrid Centre Strategic Project, Area of Urbanism and Housing, Madrid City Council.**

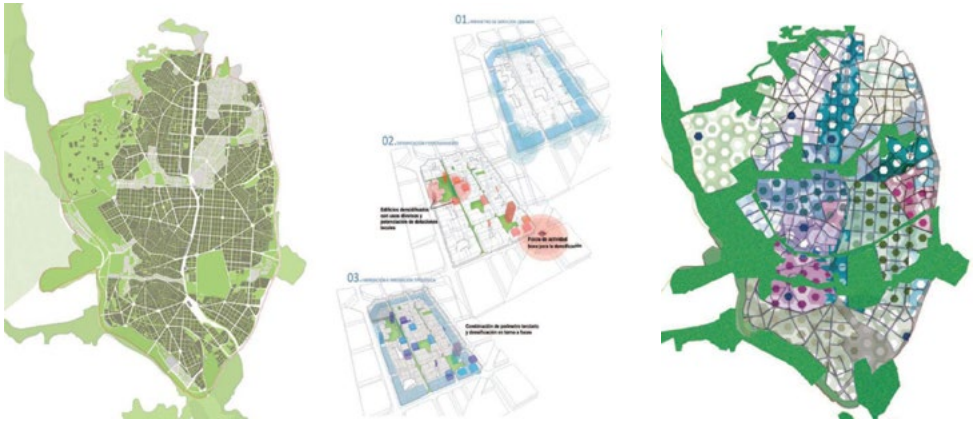
- \* Flexible regulation at the micro scale: the decomposition of an urban tissue into small areas facilitates the drawing up of detailed plans, adjusted to the specific conditions of the place
- \* International recognition: the transference of knowledge should be one of the leading principles that support this kind of urban proposals.

Cons:

- \* Difficulties derived from innovation: novelties are often hampered by the inertia of known and firmly established practices, especially when it involves taking major policy decisions
- \* Complexity in implementation: in operative terms, radical changes introduce considerable difficulties to integrate the proposals into the existing administrative structures, which are reluctant to modify the on-going processes
- \* Loss of political support: in the case of study, the demise of the Office of the Plan due to changes in the direction of the new master plan, meant the loss of interest in the project, leaving their proposals just as open ideas to chance or as possibilities, included in the new master plan.

## **SOME CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE CHANGING CONTEXTS AND THE RESULTING VISIONS FOR PLANNING**

Focusing the topic on reclaiming the ‘possibility of making in times of scarcity’ through planning, there is an obvious swinging movement that oscillates from one position to another, depending on the economic and social context within which cities operate. The analysis of this situation through the evolution of the visions that encouraged the drawing up of the master plans for Madrid during the last three decades, clearly exemplifies the effects of this changing situation that oscillated between scarcity and prosperity. The implementation of each plan has produced positive and negative outcomes, from which some lessons can be learnt.



**Figure 2-19 (left) Urban Cells net and cell conceptual inner organisation. Source: Madrid Centre Strategic Project, Area of Urbanism and Housing, Madrid City Council. Figure 2-20 (middle) Urban Cells net and cell conceptual inner organisation. Source: Madrid Centre Strategic Project, Area of Urbanism and Housing, Madrid City Council. Figure 2-21 (right) Areas of Homogeneous Identity, detailed planning. Source: Madrid Centre Strategic Project, Area of Urbanism and Housing, Madrid City Council.**

It is obvious that during periods of affluence it is easy to promote urban projects, especially the big ones, but what matters in those cases is the understanding, on the part of the local political leaders, of the value of their implications in their implementation as a way to strengthening the position of their cities in the urban system.

However, even during scarcity times, when the ‘possibilities of making’ are reduced, it is possible to introduce innovation in the cities by using different strategies. The urban acupuncture is one of them, intended to produce small but effective actions, involving different levels of administration in the implementation process as a mean to obtaining the required investments. Another way is to envisage strategic actions not necessarily related to physical aspects but close to social and economic ones.

The last reflection with respect to the ‘possibility of making’ refers to the relationship between innovation and the contextual opportunities. The case of Madrid shows how a favourable situation fosters the construction of innovative planning visions aimed at promoting substantial changes in the traditional way of making the city. But this case also shows the high dependence that exists between new ideas and proposals and the political support that facilitates or hinders their application in practice. As a corollary to this situation, it is possible to conclude that innovations in planning find their limits in the existing administrative and political structures, strongly implanted in the local governments since the rationalist period.

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