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### 1. Present Status of Planning

Presently, planning in Spain has a dual status. On the one hand, urban planning is well entrenched at the municipal level as one of the core processes of any big and medium-sized city. It can be said that every single Spanish city has adequate planning instruments to regulate land use and guide urban growth. Regarding regional planning, this process is recognized by the land use legislation “Comunidades Autónomas” (regional governments), but it is hardly ever implemented as a set of recognized guidelines for local plans because of political resistance from municipal governments.

On the other hand, since the late 1980s, urban planning in Spain has undergone a serious conceptual crisis, mostly generated by its inability to give adequate responses, in time and form, to contemporary challenges. Major criticism is levelled at its time-consuming processes, high economic costs and lack of effective capacity to stop land speculation and political corruption. All these arguments, whether proven or not, undermine the acceptance of urban planning by large segments of the business and political communities. In fact, there is a long-standing tradition among economic stakeholders of solving conflictive planning issues in the “back office” of the Planning Department. Regarding the average citizen, most are either ignorant of the objectives and procedures of local planning, or they do not care much about getting involved in the planning process unless they have a personal stake in it.

### 2. Dominant Themes and Media Coverage

Though difficult to know without a proper survey, my best educated guess is that presently most Spanish urban planners worry about sustainability and governance. Being more specific, planners’ attention is concentrated on issues related to neighbourhood rehabilitation, energy efficiency, non-motorized mobility, improvement of public spaces design, smart cities initiatives, empowerment of citizens and development of new participation channels, among others.

Excepting the recent exposure of past corruption cases linked to urban development, national and local media do not pay much attention to contemporary planning challenges. Media are more prone to talk about the latest emblematic building designed by a well-known architect than debate on the aforementioned topics. Once in a while, one can read about climate change effects or urban pollution incidents in the newspaper, but these are not reported on in a very thoughtful way. Perhaps part of the blame should be placed on urban planners themselves because they do not seem to communicate issues to the general public well enough or in an attractive format.

### 3. Theory vs. Practice

From my perspective, nowadays urban planning theory in Spain is mostly dominated by radical geographers and some physical planners who teach at university, while other professionals usually restrict their intervention to practical matters. It is difficult to discern which is the predominant theoretical trend, but whichever it is, it does not seem to have much impact on planning practitioners. Furthermore, radical thinkers, furnished with complex semantics, seem to be living in their own ivory tower, away from the rest of the planning community. Let me use an illustrative example: if a municipality needs to solve a critical planning issue, most of the time it will request the advice of a consulting firm instead of going to the nearest university. Therefore, my feeling is that there is a significant gap between theory and practice, mostly reflected in the weak links between academia and professional practice.

English literature is still a reference among Spanish planners, but with lesser impact on professional practice than some decades ago. Anglo-Saxon journals no longer gain as much attention as they did in the 1970s and 1980s. Perhaps the topics chosen by these journals, mostly Anglo and Asian urban themes, are of little interest to Spanish planners. On the contrary, cultural links with Latin America have grown in the last two decades, increasing the flow of research, publications and professional exchange between both sides. Despite this trend, no articulated and stable corpus of scientific journals has yet emerged to satisfy the professional needs of Spanish-speaking planners.

### 4. Addressing and Reducing Disparities

Though Spanish cities have not been confronted with strong ethnic clashes or social disorder, planners are seriously concerned about growing socio-economic disparities in their cities because of the long economic recession. Compared to other European countries, most Spanish cities do not experience clear-cut spatial segregation that produces urban ghettos. A compact urban fabric, an enduring social mixture within neighbourhoods and a favourable attitude towards immigrants surely helps to restrain radical spatial segregation. Nevertheless, multiculturalism can already be felt in many cities through the formation of ethnic neighbourhoods with some distinctive features, but without posing critical problems to municipalities.

It could be argued that planning has helped to soften social problems in the midst of a long and vicious economic crisis, but I do not have solid evidence at hand to support that argument. Nevertheless, if this is the case, we could assume that past municipal investments in all kinds of community facilities at the neighbourhood level have produced a public buffer for social unrest. But

again, I think that this assumption is rather simplistic; the Spanish case should be explained by multiple variables.

### 5. *Future Challenges and Education*

As an architect, I am unable to remain neutral in answering this question. Though schools of architecture are still the dominant educational centres for urban planners in Spain, planning is also taught by schools of geography and civil engineering. In general terms, students are reasonably well prepared to work as professionals, because they are able to perform critical assessments and use adequate tools to solve urban problems. Moreover, most postgraduate programmes offer an interdisciplinary approach to planning and are beginning to incorporate new technologies in their curricula. Maybe their major weakness is the scarcity of opportunities offered to students to experience professional internships before they graduate.

Whether it is taught solely by architects or geographers, planning education will inevitably be biased. The issue here is what kind of professional profile we need for the coming years and to act accordingly. In my opinion, our future challenge as planning educators will be to open our schools of architecture to new disciplines without losing our ability to design urban spaces. Thus, students should acquire more transversal competencies, together with strong analytical tools, which would enable them to operate in different cultural contexts.

### 6. *Role of the European Union*

As explained in planning literature, the European Union still has to overcome significant political and cultural barriers before attempting to establish a joint spatial planning policy. National differences and interests are still too entrenched in the EU to think that a joint policy would be feasible in the short term. Furthermore, considering present territorial and socioeconomic disparities among state members, a top-down policy enacted by Brussels could even worsen the situation.

Despite these obstacles, I strongly support a European guiding urban policy that promotes territorial cohesiveness and prevents land speculation dynamics and environmental impacts such as the ones experienced in Spain in the last two decades. Optimistically, I believe that a preliminary EU joint policy could be implemented in the short term if two conditions were met: one, it should be focused on developing intra-European infrastructures and preserving natural areas before proceeding into down-scale policies; and two, it should be accompanied by a solid fiscal and redistribution policy common to all state members. But given the present state of European governance, these stated conditions may just be wishful thinking on my part.

#### *Disclaimer*

Answers to this survey are solely based on personal opinions, which do not necessarily represent the general feeling either of the planning profession or the dominant line of thought in planning education in Spain.