

REFLECTIONS ON THE ISSUE OF DECENT HOUSING

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ABSTRACT

Article 47 of the Spanish Constitution states: "All Spaniards are entitled to enjoy decent and adequate housing". However, the answer to "what is the meaning of decent housing?" cannot be found anywhere. If we considered the Technical Building Code (CTE), it might be said that a decent and adequate home is the one which accomplishes the CTE aims. Nevertheless, according to popular beliefs, there are other ideas implied within the given concept: home ownership or somewhere to become rooted with. That is to say, a home for one's whole life, a solid and permanent construction with some preferences towards certain materials (such as brick or concrete). Regarding urbanism, other considerations such as location, proximity to transport networks, workplaces, hospitals, schools or CBDs can be found as well.

By contrast, if this issue is contemplated from a sustainable perspective, these mental structures and cultural behaviours can be counterproductive. That is because there are certain points that would be desirable, such as pursuing a sustainable urban planning or promoting a greater mobility to find a job among population. Within this context, the aim of this article is not to offer a solution (which should be agreed among the different social agents) but to encourage a debate about the current social housing model and to reflect about different alternatives. Furthermore, a possible answer for this debate would be the following: the necessity of distinguishing between a dwelling as a property, as a product to be bought and sold; and the minimum social housing unit seen as a need for society. This minimum housing unit would be incompatible with the property of the residence or land. In addition, the formulation of this housing model could be based on a type of dwelling that would be ephemeral, removable, recyclable, bio-climatic, transportable, and that would be located on a piece of land specially intended for it. Finally, a model of housing whose spirit would respond to the consideration that everybody, rather than owning a dwelling, can trust that they will be supplied with a home that meets their requirements for habitability, location and mobility whenever and wherever they will need it.

Keywords: housing, society, urbanism, property, infrastructure.

1.- Introduction

Article 47 of the Spanish Constitution states: "All Spaniards are entitled to enjoy decent and adequate housing". However, the answer to "what is the meaning of decent housing?" cannot be found anywhere. If we considered the Technical Building Code (CTE), it might be said that a decent and adequate home is the one which accomplishes the CTE aims. Nevertheless, according to popular beliefs, there are other ideas implied within the given concept: home ownership [1] or somewhere to become rooted with. That is to say, a home for one's whole life, a solid and permanent construction with some preferences towards certain materials (such as brick or concrete). Regarding urbanism, other considerations such as location, proximity to transport networks, workplaces, hospitals, schools or CBDs can be found as well.

By contrast, if this issue is contemplated from a sustainable perspective, these mental structures and cultural behaviours can be counterproductive. For instance, when it comes to promote a territorial balance that minimizes the resources consumption. Or even topics of social sustainability such as encouraging mobility in order to find a job, or the matter of social housing [2].

In this context, the objective of this article, more than outlining a solution, is to promote a debate with regard to the topic of what a decent housing should be, in order to look into other possibilities. With this purpose, the article starts with a summary of the problems that the current situation produces. Afterwards, a possible proposal will be included as a basis to support the debate.

2.- The current concept of decent housing as a problem

2.1.- Figures

In the current situation there are nearly twenty six millions of dwellings in Spain (Ministerio de Fomento, 2010). If we compare this number with the population of the country, around forty seven millions, we obtain a proportion of a house per every two inhabitants.

However, it is necessary to take into account that more than three millions of these dwellings remain empty, without being occupied or rented. This fact is the origin of several controversies. With respect to this topic, we can point out the solution given in the Netherlands where the government imposes more taxes to those empty houses that are not rented.

On the other hand, it is also necessary to insist that a big percentage of these empty dwellings belongs to not finished buildings because of the crisis, old and ruined constructions, or they are situated in undesirable locations such as several towns around Madrid that were badly thought to become commuter towns.

Besides, we have to bear in mind the holiday housing. The number of buildings in touristic places, above all near the coast, is as much, or even greater, than the number of empty dwellings, and they are only used during a short period of time a year [3].

2.2.- Impact of the construction

The materials that are preferably used in Spain are concrete and brick. Nowadays there are several alternatives such as plasterboards in internal walls. Nevertheless, the problem is that they are not frequently accepted. Many people consider them as "feeble", quite easy to be demolished. Buildings have to be hard, resistant, unbreakable.

The traditional use of concrete and brick in Spanish construction is the cause of many problems with respect to recycling. We must remember the enormous extensions of tip in the outskirts of our cities. Concrete is a rocky material that is very

difficult to reuse. If we think in ceramic elements, they can be arranged in new constructions. For example, old tiles are really appreciated in new houses. But this fact would be possible as long as the elements were not broken. A current tendency is to recycle them as sand and gravel for roads and concrete. However, for a quality concrete not all the material must come from old buildings. Plus, roads, highways and so on, are structures that occupy natural land [4].

Precisely, the natural land is a issue of great relevance. The natural soil, once destroyed, is virtually irrecoverable. A soil lasts millions of years to form. The problem is even more catastrophic if we remember all those housing developments that are not being used because they have not been finished, or they are in undesirable places. Furthermore, we have the example of the holiday housing near the coast.

2.3.- Impact of the territorial location

Apart from topics as solid construction, a decent housing is usually thought to be conveniently situated near the central areas, without the necessity of commuting and with all the facilities in the surroundings.

As a direct consequence, the population is becoming more and more urban while rural areas are going empty. Nowadays, the number of inhabitants of the four biggest metropolitan areas in Spain (Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia and Sevilla) is bigger than the third part of the entire population of the country. To sum up, according to the data of the INE (National Institute of Estadística), a 73% of the population live in cities while less than the ten percent remain in rural areas.

This condition is the cause of several problems originated by the concentration of people.

Firstly, the ecological overcharge. A limited territory around the cities is obliged to absorb all the consumption of resources and all the wastes dumped. We are talking about the rubbish and also about the fecal water. The bigger concentration of people, the more polluted water have the local ecosystems to absorb.

Secondly, the infrastructures. The bigger population, the bigger are the infrastructures to provide energy, sanitary water, or the sewage system,... On the one hand, a bigger infrastructure need a bigger expense to maintain and repair it. On the other hand, it is also necessary to think in the resources that are wasted. For instance, sanitary water. The estimation of water consumption per person is different in a city (about five hundred litres per person a day) than in a small town (two or three hundred litres). The explanation is not that a inhabitant of a city consumes much more water than one of a town. But the issue is that the more extense is a net of pipes, the more likelihood of water leaking. Something similar occurs in lines of energy, because nowadays there is not a proper method of storing energy.

Finally, we have to take into account the effects in the economy and society. People are moving from the rural areas to the cities. An economic principle states: "activity attracts population and population generates activity". Activity and population are concentrating on cities whereas rural areas are emptying of people and becoming underdeveloped.

Some people think about this last consequence as a factor of progress. In the current situation cities are competing each other to be the most relevant, and their relevance depends on the capacity of attracting people and generating activity. Nevertheless, the social consequences are terrible. The need to compete in order to apply for a job is tremendous. The society is divided into classes, wealthier and poorer. As a result a new concept has appeared in the last years, that of "fourth world". This term is referred to the masses of inhabitants that live in the outskirts of the cities, without a proper job, often dependant of charity, and submerged in an underground economy.

2.4.- Property as the key factor

Maybe the main point that differentiates the Spanish way of understanding the concept of decent housing with respect to other countries is the notion about property.

The tendency among the different governments in Spain throughout the last half century, has been to build great urbanizations of social housings (VPO). These can be rented or bought, the price is less expensive than the usual, and they are offered to people of the lower classes. Although, the preference by the users is the second one: to possess a dwelling as a property.

In other European countries we can see different systems. For example, the British model. The British government also builds great quantities of dwellings, but people prioritarily rent them rather than own. The price of the rent is low. The system is quite flexible because rents can be inherited, and if somebody moved to other neighborhoods or towns, they would receive a new house.

This fact shows how the Spanish tendency to prefer a house in property is not a necessity but a cultural matter. In other words, Spanish people could rent houses rather than own them, but there is a kind of mental structure, of custom, that leads them to look for the ownership of a house.

A possible explanation is that in Spain we suffer of the inexistence of a culture of renting. And this inexistence is owed to a lack of a satisfactory legal regulation about the topic. On the one hand, for owners, a law that will offer them guaranties in case the tenants do not pay. On the other hand, for tenants, a regulation that would state a maximum price of the rents. A common belief between Spaniards is that it is preferably to own a house or a flat, even with a large mortgage, because if you pay it, at the end you will obtain the property of the dwelling. By contrast, to rent a house means that you are paying for it but without the possibility of owning it. With this reasoning, it is logic that if the cost of the mortgage was similar to that of the hire, you would prefer apply for the property.

Apart from this, we can find other explanation in the historic process of the last fifty years. Apparently, before the sixties this culture of property did not exist. In cities historians recognises housing models like the "corrales de vecinos" (neighborhood patios) where all the dwellings were rented. Precisely, it was during the sixties when we could identify an origin of the culture of property. The sixties in Spain was characterized by the "desarrollismo", an economic boom, that supposed a massive migration from the countryside to the cities. There was an urgent necessity of providing houses to all these people, and it was solved by great promotions of cheap dwellings. The country was in the middle of an age of prosperity, people worked, were able to afford a house. Suddenly an entire generation became owners. This fact generated a status, a condition, the pride of being an owner. Pride that the following generations tried to imitate.

Nevertheless, the conditions have changed. The price of dwellings is getting more expensive at the same time that the people purchasing power is lower and lower [5]. Even so, families continue to contract mortgages to pay in twenty, thirty, forty years and more. With respect to social housing, we have to take into account that, even though they are cheaper, people who buy them have also lower rents, so the proportional cost is similar.

In any case, the issue is that people need an economic security to possess a dwelling. And according to the variability of the market economy, with seasons of prosperity and crisis, this condition is quite difficult to reach. For example, the current economic crisis in Spain with more than a 25% of unemployment, a percentage even larger for younger people, up to a 50%. Consequences can be observed every day: the evictions drama, social and political agitation, young people that are unable to

become independent... To sum up, an important percentage of population incapable of getting a decent housing.

Finally, this situation affects the society in other ways. Due to the fact that families need an economic security, people with a regular income are unwilling to take part in risky financial operations like running a business, which would be positive to generate employment. Or the lack of a politic of low rents discourages many young people from moving to other cities to look for a job. Or even it would affect natality. Another mental structure among the Spanish population is that without a house to live it is not possible to think in having children, and you do not have a house without an economic security. Experts foresee that the Spanish rate of natural increase will be negative in 2017 or 2018.

3.- Elements of a proposal

3.1.- Renting instead of owning

After having pointed out a summary of the negative effects of the current concept of decent housing, as it was told, it is necessary to repeat that the main purpose of this article is to promote a debate regarding new ways about social housing. As a starting point the following proposal is offered.

Firstly, if the ownership of a house is considered as the key factor, it is logical to comment that every proposal about social housing should start with an specification about what it does understand with regard to the topic of property. Therefore, in this proposal we make a distinction. On the one hand, there is the notion of a house as an object that can be bought or sold, a dwelling as a property. This type of commerce should not disappear. The matter is that, whenever it comes to social housing, it is proposed to separate the ownership of a house with living in that house. In other words, to encourage a culture of renting when related with social housing.

With this principle, as a start, it is conceived a model of minimum decent social housing where the inhabitant does not possess the ownership of the dwelling or the land.

This type of houses would be situated in especially reserved terrains, in the centre of a city, in the outskirts or in the rural areas. The ownership and management of this terrain could be public or private, provided that the inhabitants paid a minimum and affordable rent.

In any case, the aim of this initiative is that, though the tenants would not be the owners of the house, it is guaranteed that every citizen, as it is stated in Constitution, will be supplied with a decent housing whenever and wherever they need it. In conclusion, it is not the ownership but the Right of a decent housing what they will receive.

3.2.- Ephemeral buildings

A second point of a proposal must concern to how to build this type of housing.

Thinking in this issue, alternatives to concrete and brick would be preferably used. Materials and elements that can be reused and/or recycled, but recycled in a way that the entire amount of material would be used with the same function. Also biodegradable components that come from easily renewable raw materials.

Apart from recyclability, other consideration would be the condition of ephemeral, in the sense that the house could be assembled, disassembled and moved to other places. In this way, a construction could be dismantled and moved from a land if nobody is going to live there, a building would be able to adapt to the requirements of the occupants (like new members...), and we could update the building without the need of a complete or partial refurbishment.

To sum up, this article outlines a type of detachable construction that would be

assembled with compartments or boards. Users would be supplied with these elements by the government, or they could own them. In this way, if they need to move, they will be able to dismantle the house and reassemble it in the new location. A drawback of this type of architectural conception is that the population nowadays prefer solid and permanent buildings that are incapable of moving. Furthermore, there are many negative misconceptions about a detachable house. They are conceived as a temporary solution, with a low quality, and referred to marginal environments.

Opposite to this, experiences like the competitions of the "Solar Decathlon", with good results for the Spanish Universities, have showed that ephemeral and detachable houses are compatible with a good quality and habitability. What is more, these designs assure a compliance of the sustainability principles, such as reduction of energy and water consumption, that many modern buildings are not able to accomplish. It is true that the budgets of these projects are quite large, not affordable for many people. But with the constitution of a national industry where these elements would be standardized and serie-produced, the cost would decrease while the quality increases.

A third requirement to this type of housing would be the capacity of adapting to the urbanistic demands of density. Regarding this topic, we are going to distinguish between low and high density.

Firstly, we have areas of low density as the surroundings of villages and small towns. In this case the solution is simple, it consists on situating the compartments directly on the terrain without foundations, only on a layer of gravel, in order to avoid destroying the natural land. Apart, they would have to be plugged to infrastructures of water, electricity and sewage. About these infrastructures, it is advisable that they would also be detachable in order to minimize the impact on the natural land.

Secondly, in areas of high density, the units would have to be situated not on the terrain but in a multi-storey building. In this case they do need foundations. We can suppose that the soil has been already disturbed, or that it is admissible to build foundations in order to reduce the surface of affected land. Besides, we need not only an infrastructure but also a structure. The approach would be similar to some projects of the Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena, like his project of the "Quinto Monroy neighborhood in Iquique". Due to the lack of money, Aravena only builds a part of the project concerning to the stairs and wet areas (bathroom, kitchen,...). With respect to the rest of functions, the project provides empty spaces with the purpose that the inhabitants could colonize them according to their convenience.

The strategy would be similar to that of Aravena. A naked structure, like a skeleton, is erected. It would be conformed by pillars and beams around a central nucleus of stairs, elevators and systems. This structure would be designed to allow the residential units to plug to the nucleus. In other words, a naked structure where the tenants are renting the volume, and afterwards they could occupy that volume using compartments and boards.

With regard to this structure, it is also advisable that it was detachable. We must prioritize metal screwed structures instead of concrete ones, in such way that we could dismantle them when the building life is finished. Besides, this concept allow us to increase o reduce the height of the building depending on the needed density.

3.3.- Encouraging movility

A third point of a proposal would refer to the location of the urbanizations.

It is logical to relate demand with location. There is a direct relationship between the centrality of a certain place, its capacity of attracting and generating activity, with the number of people that would desire a house in that site. According to this criteria we

can distinguish between two types of areas: "attractive" and "transitory" ones.

The attractive areas are those that we can foresee that there will be always an enormous demand to live in those places, and therefore the result is a waiting list. Due to this fact, the configuration of the construction would be a multi-storey building, where, to allocate dwellings to people, the government would have to define several criteria (always without increasing the price of the rent) such as the number of children, that their workplace would be located in the zone, or certain medical necessities. The duration of the stay would not be further than a short number of years (five, seven, ten,...) in order to increase the people that are going to live in the area.

Secondly, the transitory areas are those with less demand and where it is not going to exist a waiting list. The density, depending on the context, would be low or high. People can live in these places indefinitely, even with the possibility of inheriting rents. Besides, these areas can be considered as habitational cushion zones because a great percentage of the people living there are waiting to be allocated to attractive areas.

However, because of their condition of cushion zones, the transitory areas are extremely strategically valuable. As it was told before, people generate activity. According to this, what it is proposed is the possibility of allocating transitory amounts of people living in a certain place in order to revitalize depressed areas. Furthermore, we can think about operations like strategic decentralization. In other words, to move inhabitants from the biggest cities to other smaller towns and even villages. With this operation, it is pursued the possibility of creating a critical mass of population that generates economic activity in those places.

4.- Conclusion

Along the article we have contemplated how many of the beliefs in Spain with respect to housing are bringing problems related to environment, economy and society. Even more, the current culture of property prevents many people from getting a decent housing. Taking these facts into account, it is vital to point out the necessity of a new line of thinking the issues related to social housing.

What is more, it is not only to promote a debate, but to change a collective way of doing things and of understanding the world. The matter is that our culture, that is grabbed in our minds, is acting against us. Bearing this in mind, the previous step to recycle and reuse materials is recycling our mental conceptions, to encourage other ways of thinking the progress and our lives in an ecology of the mind. Finally, what is needed is to conceive that conditions have changed, that situations that did work ten, twenty or thirty years ago, or in the sixties, is possible that they do not serve us now. Each generation have their own problems. In the current situation, our goals are to approach a sustainable paradigm, to learn how to close material cycles, to reduce the resources consumption. But also, we have the target of conceiving a new model of decent housing that really serves us and works according to our necessities.

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