

OPPORTUNISM AS A GOOD PRACTICE FOR THE REGENERATION OF OBSOLETE NEIGHBORHOODS. A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH TO URBAN REALITY.

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INTRODUCTION

This article is part of a series of works that are intended to explore alternatives to the model of urban sprawl that is characteristic of the second half of the twentieth century. In response to the unsustainable use of land, it starts from a zero-growth assumption that is based on the recovery of inherited housing stock, enhancing and completing the existing in response to the challenges of today's society.

This hypothesis is based on the demographic and economic potential that many neighbourhoods of so-called first urban periphery have¹. This has been defined as the area of urban expansion that was built to the urgent quantitative needs of homes existing in Europe at the end of the mid-century wars due to massive migration from the countryside to cities².

It should be understood that these areas have been in a strategic position between historic city centres and the new developments that have emerged in the real estate boom³. This makes them appear as areas of opportunity in the move towards sustainable city models departing from approaches that seek to “optimize, preserve or increase the value of all the existing urban capital (social, urbanism, built heritage, etc.), in contrast to other ways of intervention which, inside this urban capital, only prioritizes and preserves the value of the land”⁴.

Despite taking the precepts of the modern city compiled in the Charter of Athens (1933) – the basis of the western urban theory – they can be recognized as areas that have grown without an overall view, “urbanized areas where the construction of town is absent”⁵. In this sense, their development has led to spontaneous processes through which the inhabitants of these neighbourhoods have modified the original morphology using natural processes to adapt the generic typologies to the specific modes of life and the particular conditions of their own place. Therefore, this article recognizes these processes within the concept of urban opportunism.

Characterized by spontaneity and therefore lacking of regulation, these processes have historically been valued by experts and other urban agents as anomalous situations by “claiming that have associated negative effects on the habitability of the built environment”⁶. However, we wonder about the extent to which this fact can be used as a useful tool to address the plurality and the instability that characterizes Bauman’s liquid modern society⁷.

Before analysing an example in the Andalusian context, the article reflects the experience of the urban model of the city of Tokyo as a reference for these spontaneous processes of city construction. Subsequently, it picks a prospective methodology for a specific study case that is based on the recognition of the concept of opportunism as good practice to regenerate obsolete neighbourhoods.

APPROACH TO THE CONCEPT OF URBAN OPPORTUNISM

Learning from the Japanese experience

Unlike Western legal framework - that defines ratios of use, occupancy rates, even alignments and specific volumetric - the Japanese urban planning is characterized by a more relaxed view of the regulator fact. Japanese urban theories -clearly influenced by Feng Shui - understanding the city in terms of intensities of use, allowing greater freedom to intervene in it, which favours the processes of urban mutability as those that have been previously recognized. The modern vision of the concept “use” is related to the definition of urban functions. By contrast, the idea of intensity referees to the degree of utilization that can be achieved in a particular area of the city regardless of the activities that eventually develop⁸. Hence, it can be associated with a way to promote the efficient use of land.

In this context, urban situations arise as a result of spontaneous aggregation of disparate architectures in a specific way to respond to the opportunities that the city offers them in that specific time, and which involves prioritizing short-term interests to achieve certain goals or to solve shared concerns as group.

This process has been analysed in the publication *Made in Tokyo*, which presents the city as the result of a casuistry of hybrid buildings by juxtaposition, stacking or even theft, in response to market forces and the particular community needs. This research was conducted within the Tokyo Institute of Technology, and concluded that these situations are the result of high-density conditions and little available land, maximizing the developmental potential of buildings and urban infrastructure. This is in alignment with the efficiency conditions that are required for the contemporary city in response to the model of unsustainable consumption of the territory and it can be understand as a first type of urban opportunism.

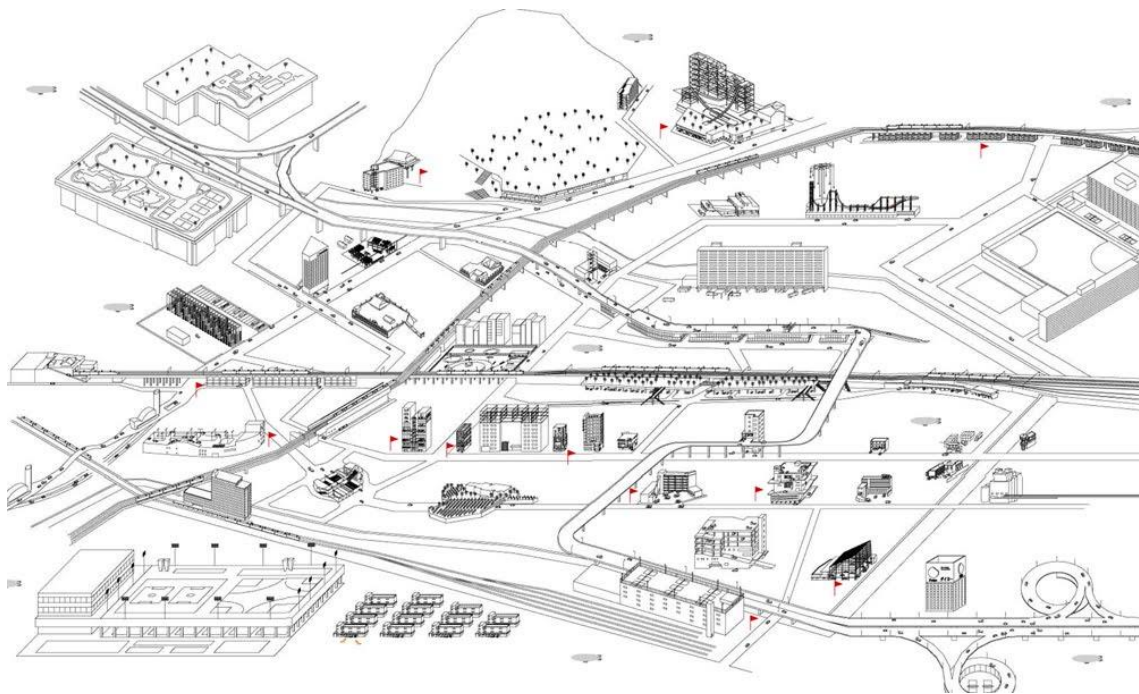


Figure 1. *Made in Tokyo: Guide Book*. Source: *Atelier Bow-Wow*

Notice that to define these situations the term hybrid is only mentioned twice, and under consideration of an "unexpected adjacency of functions" defined as "cross-categorical hybrid"⁹. The root of this fact may lie in the clear differences between this kind of process and the concept of hybrid that has transcended in the West after the publication of *Hybrid Buildings* in 1985¹⁰. It is true that in the literature there is not a

specific reference to this statement, but the fact that these investigations have been published with a lag of 15 years, seems to reveal a clear gap with Fenton's hybrid concept. The concept of ecosystem resilience in constant metamorphosis, as a result of spontaneous and unregulated bottom-up actions made by local population, is far from a product of a fully planned action. Going beyond the autonomy of the hybrids, it is found a relationship of mutual symbiosis between the new and the existing. This is the result of unexpected opportunities offered by existing buildings or urban gaps - in a wide range of opportunism - to respond to a particular situation among multiple possibilities.



Figure 2. Tokyo's Cross-Categorical Hybrids vs Fenton's Hybrid Buildings. Source: Tokyo by Pariwat A-nantachina & Slice Porosity Building by Steven Holl

These processes may be associated with the dynamics that characterize the informal city since they are spontaneous urban growth, however they differ in the underlying causes and the resulting urban model. Informality responds to the inability of the population to get a house or a portion of land in the real estate market, so it can be considered the result of settlements that have been developed irrespective of the urban regulation and therefore cannot be considered legal¹¹.

By contrast, the model of Tokyo is a clear example of holistic development that allows thinking and working in multiple dimensions simultaneously. From the normative legitimacy it seeks to build long-term "strategic scenarios" with some flexibility for innovation, adaptation and evolution.

That concept talks about a project that has a continued unbroken line, which will be not interrupted although one of the elements requires redefinition. It is also about the integration of all of them in a whole structure implemented through particular territorial actions, to optimize resources, facing the simple isolated intervention on objects and subjects that are shown on the informal city.

In addition to the constituent elements of informality which are the legal irregularity in the parcelling and land ownership, it can also be explained from the liberal individualistic perspective that characterize our current liquid society¹². Accordingly, we believe these processes differ from the idea of collective growth which is sought in the Tokyo model: user-generated neighbourhoods where people, objects and lived spaces are all knitted together by the impulse to constantly improve and transform¹³.

An example of opportunism in the Andalusian urban context.

To understand the possibilities that these situations can be opened to urban regeneration processes, let us use a neighbourhood built in the 50s in Malaga.

The neighbourhood of Carranque is the largest-scale building work carried out in Malaga within the 1st National Housing Plan. It was built with a clear rural character following the precepts of the Autarkic model. This constant in all designs of the Regime had a clear relationship with the position of these pieces with respect to the historic city. They were designed as small satellite towns connected to the main town by one of the historical axes of urban growth precisely in response to the transfer of rural-urban population¹⁴.

They are urban areas that are characterized by low building density and a high percentage of open spaces. Mainly, detached houses equipped with a front garden and a back cultivation zone that occupies the interior area. Along the perimeter a series of multi-storey residential blocks were arranged with collective spaces of natural character¹⁵.

This urban setting was an answer to very specific housing needs that came from a common way of life. Definitely, it attempted to facilitate the adaptability of those who had migrated from the countryside¹⁶. Though it would allow a process of urban mutability as a result of the new needs of these families to the new situations that society was imposing them. In a gradual process of local empowerment, the neighbours began to build up in the free space of their houses. Thus, the families demanded change to the original typology to adapt it to new family requirements.

Immediately most of residents who were living in the residential blocks claimed to modify their apartments as well. Ground floor apartments occupied part of the interior yards, but the space contiguous to many linear blocks was also taken over. In this last case, it is important to clarify that these portions of land did not belong to the neighbours in contrast to the rest of situations.

In absence of a specific legislation to regulate the development of this area, it started a process that has resulted in the vast majority of residential units (detached houses and ground floor apartments) have seen their original surface area increased.



Figure 3. Opportunism process in Carranque. Source: Compiled by author.

The classification of these phenomena – keeping it distinct to Made in Tokyo – determines that there is no pre-set pattern beyond the boundaries of their yards in the case of detached homes and the interior space in H-blocks. In the case of the linear blocks, there has been an apparent agreement, which has created a

fictitious line that determines the maximum appropriation just as an extrusion of the unit. Ultimately (and the most interesting from a phenomenological point of view) is the mode of appropriation of the corners of blocks. As it has not been possible to clearly determine a limit to these occupations, there has been a process of neighbour negotiation. The only rule is do not harm others, requiring a consensus among all and creating win-win situations.



Figure 4. Catalogue of opportunism situations in the neighbourhood. Source: Compiled by author.

This dynamic has been accompanied by processes of occupation of large free areas held by the public administration. It is important to keep in mind that the first urban planning of democracy try to balance the shortcomings of facilities (especially the educational ones) in such areas¹⁷. Although these areas were built with some essential equipment according to the Falangist ideology, these were insufficient to the demographic characteristics of that time.

Conceiving the relational spaces (originally designed for the development of community's activities) as urban spaces which could accommodate these new infrastructures, the proportion of empty space has been reduced and conflict situations have been caused as a consequence of adapting new constructions to the existing urban morphology. Paradoxically, while the natural process of urban mutation that had been previously experienced was defined as an anomalous situation, a space that neighbours had previously conceived as their own was occupied under the umbrella of the new urban planning legality.

The consequences of this fact can be intuited. If the authorities sought to stop this practise, it has been achieved the opposite effect. This process has been radicalized in recent years, causing a gap between the existing typology and the prevailing mode of life - in order to adapt original types to current needs. This has led to most of the spaces that remained unoccupied being developed, and some of the detached houses being increased in the number of storeys.

Although the urban areas were built in pursuit of the collective, in recent decades, they have turned to the impersonal as the result of the individualism that globalization has imposed on current society and, in this case, it has been increased by the lack of spaces that represent them as a group. In this sense we must attempt to regain the lost consciousness of the neighbourhood, and therefore it is necessary to consider the socio-spatial processes as a way to articulate the basis of any collective: the common, the visible and the open¹⁸.

OPPORTUNISM AS GOOD PRACTICE FOR URBAN REGENERATION.

The social dimension for a sustainable rehabilitation. From the unique mode to multiple lifestyles.

In a second acceptance, opportunism can be defined as the ability to capitalise on the mistakes of others: use opportunities created by errors, weaknesses or distractions ahead of ourselves¹⁹. It is a view with an obvious negative connotation associated with a lack of integrity, but where there may be clarification if we consider legitimate options offered by the fact of being socially accepted.

Moving to the field of study, occupation processes have been traditionally qualified as erroneous or anomalous situations, but nevertheless they respond to local negotiation synergies that have been socially legitimized throughout this period of time.

As has been seen, this sort of neighbourhood has undergone a continual process of local appropriations, which is no more than the response of residents to their various lifestyles. According to the current technological world, the houses of the XX century require a re-programming to adapt them to the changing needs of habitability that the XXI century demands. It is the concept defined by Peter Sloterdijk as *hyperactive vibrating jelly*, which encompasses a society of unstable horizontal networks to connect disparate lifestyles. These have deviated from the unique mode that it has been attempting to impose²⁰.

This divergence between the content and container leads to a series of imbalances in the lifestyle that derive from a false ideal of imposed normality, and the impossibility of a free development of his stay. Besides, traditional housing imposes a false homogeneity in time, making a full adaptation to different needs impossible. The concerns that we have to change, lead us to some uncontrolled and excessive rehabilitation costs, due to the high stiffness of departure. All this will lead us into a series of feelings of dissatisfaction with the habitat and inhabitant: ourselves.

In this sense, it seems logical to recognize this situation, which is a reflection of the need to adapt the original typologies to the characteristics of the XXI century features. Also, the strategy would get the *modus operandi* of the neighbours as one of the tools of the project, through local negotiation processes, which do not impose previous conditions that will be rejected by citizen.

An example of application in a real context

To understand the potential of this concept when it comes to intervening in neighbourhoods obsoletes we are going to focus on a particular block in the case of study.

Initially, it is necessary to analyse the existing pathologies from different points of view: structure, construction, accessibility and function. Hence, it is essential that the approach of a rehabilitation strategy would be able to resolve these issues comprehensively in order to ensure an efficient intervention.

Cases like that one, where structural deficiencies require significant consolidation intervention, suggest that this measure can be used to solve those detected housing conditions. The actions can be based on the need for stabilization of the load-bearing walls during the surgery. This leads us to think of using this circumstance to propose the stabilizing structure as a fixed element. This will help to solve other pathologies such as improving accessibility issues, or energy efficiency with a new wraparound screened. Consequently, it can be considered another form of opportunism, since it searches for maximum efficiency in a costly intervention.

Additionally, this type of intervention necessarily involves taking into account inhabitants' lifestyle in order to link the container to the content. A proper proposal is only conceivable from resident knowledge. In this sense, this consolidation may support new "plug-in's" to activate each of the existing buildings, as long as the maximum load hypothesis would be determined. With this in mind it is possible to accommodate multiplicity. So, from basic types, existing in the neighbourhood, it is achievable to set up a customized typology with the accession of prefabricated and quickly erected elements in order that buildings be adjusted to each occupant's need.

Thus, these would allow them increasing the family, hosting grandparents or returning sons, allowing teenagers' independence (the pseudo-emancipation of young) or the segregation of spaces in housing where elders are living alone - it is no detriment to a collective game rules, which are necessary for communal living and good understanding as a group. Hence, a catalogue of solutions will be defined so that residents acquire either model according to their needs.

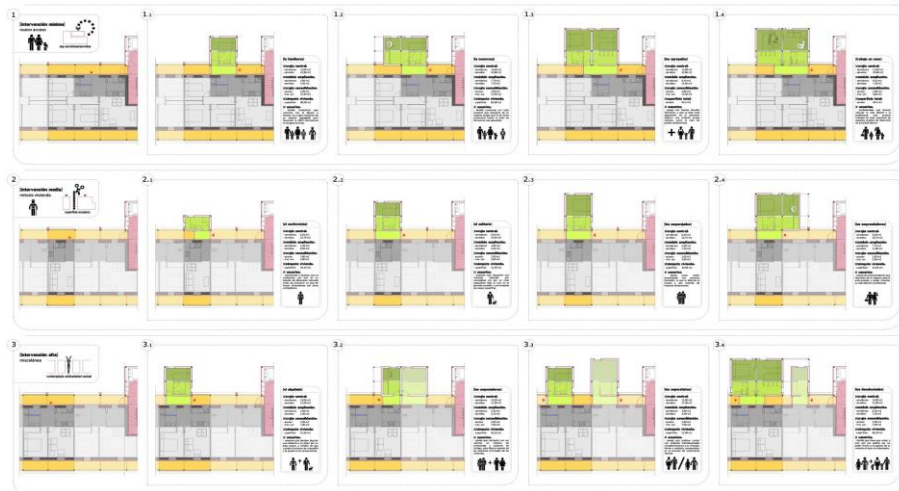


Figure 5. Adaptation to multiple lifestyles. Source: Compiled by author.

It should be recognized that this proposal goes beyond the experiences that seek to equip the buildings of a fixed number of autonomous and equipped rooms to be occupied by consensus among all neighbours. These have been defined as satellite rooms for their peculiar relationship with the house building²¹.

By contrast, the proposed methodology is considered a way to achieve a flexible result, an easily manipulated and open system, and therefore, with capacity for change, to extend the life of this structure that has not been originally thought for that purpose.

CONCLUSIONS

The approach to urban regeneration from the understanding of the multiple dimensions that affect and determine the degree of obsolescence shows that it will be difficult to rely on the ability of the finish, defined and fully delimited. In this sense, we can approach the urban reality according to the Japanese experience using the following maximums:

1. The complexity must be addressed from a global strategy that would be able to take into account particular considerations of each different dimension that affect these kinds of interventions.
2. A scene of totality must be build as a way to achieve a flexible, mutable and adaptable result: an open system with change capability.
3. The immobilise of the current planning must be overcome without inventing anything new, but simply taking advantage of synergies and short-term opportunities that the city makes available to the designer.
4. Among other advantages, it allows to recognize the diversity that defines current liquid society. This ensures the achievement of the action and avoids the rejection that is caused by the stranger status of everything that is imposed.

Understanding the concept of urban opportunism as good practice to regenerate obsolete neighbourhoods advocates the recognition of spontaneous processes that underlies the social dynamics of a particular place. In this sense, if urban actions are based on intrinsic issues to each place, the success of the action will be guaranteed, since it arises from daily routines²². It means that architects cannot be just an exterior

observer to judge and decide based on rational knowledge, they must assume an active role in the developing of the project, taking the risk which is associated with direct involvement in the object that will be transformed. This involvement determines a responsible answer defined by the ethical sense of it acts. In short, it means an active position in shared processes that look and listen the current city.

Consequently, it would allow hybridize the new with all intrinsic matters to that place and that is based on their own logic in order to ensure the attractiveness of the neighbourhoods to keep them alive, that is the principal goal of the whole research.

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