

# 2.7

## CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN CITY-MAKING PROCESS

### Materialization-Emptying-Regeneration on Large Land Properties

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#### Methodology

This chapter provides a particular methodology in the field of Urban Studies for understanding the European cities' making process from the late 19th century onward, its features are the following. Firstly, the proposed approach refers to the construction, emptying, and regeneration of specific high-consuming-land activities and functions (i.e., industrial, military, and railway settlements and, more generally, equipment and services such as markets and schools). Secondly, the particularity of these activities and functions is the need of large properties of land to conduct their activities. As a result, while performing, they are producing an 'urban land rent' (Campos Venuti 1971: 1–44) and subsequently they can undergo real estate and financial operations to foster urban renewal and regeneration processes (Álvarez Mora and Camerin 2019). For these reasons, Camerin (2020) states that these high-consuming-land activities can be called 'great properties'. Thirdly, this analysis highlights the phases of construction, emptying, and regeneration of great industrial, military, and railway properties intended as a series of different historical moments which have an "accumulating" effect on their surroundings. It means that these processes happen over the time by spatial juxtaposition, the consequence of which is the progressive creation of new (and higher) values of urban land rent in the place where the activities are located, influencing their surroundings too.

The reason of such approach relies on the relationship between land and urban development over time according to the logic of capital (Alonso, 1964; Vielle 1973). The definition of this methodological approach refers, consequently, to three moments (i.e., construction, emptying, and regeneration) manifesting themselves through different 'urban development models'. These urban development models, in turn, deal with so many other forms of city making, i.e., 'traditional', 'disaggregated', and 'urban sprawl' (Álvarez Mora 2004).

In a nutshell, paragraph two gives a general overview of the processes, while paragraph three reports the original construction process affecting specific urban areas, namely, it is the 'production of the built environment' (Harvey 1985). Paragraph four focuses on the phase of dismantling and abandonment of great properties that take place for reasons regarding their "low profitability" for the capitalist mode of production. Eventually, paragraph five addresses urban regeneration as this practice takes place for "rent" needs imposed by the capital demands to makes the upper-class appropriation of the city effective.



**FIGURE 2.7.1** An example of profit-driven spaces: the former Jiří of Poděbrady Army Barracks is nowadays reused as Palladium Shopping Center.

Source: Photograph by F. Camerin (December 2018).

The materialization-dismantling-regeneration analysis of great properties basically results in an original tool to understand the European city-making process from the late 19th century onward being strictly linked to the real estate market and driven by rents demands. By the application of this analysis, this chapter tackles some of the impacts of the capitalist city's mode of production that demonstrate the commitment to the 'city as a product' (aimed to create profit-driven spaces, see Álvarez Mora 2015: 11–13; [Figure 2.7.1](#)) – at the expense of the 'city as *oeuvre*' (aimed to realize social reproduction space for citizenship, see Álvarez Mora 2015: 15–18; [Figure 2.7.2](#)).

### The Specificity of the Three Processes: Construction-Emptying-Regeneration

The following paragraphs aim to interpret the meaning of each of the three processes – construction, emptying, and regeneration – affecting great industrial, military, and railway properties, as well as the close relationship that links these phases and makes them interdependent. The phases of construction, obsolescence-emptying, and urban regeneration are intended as real estate processes that carry out – but also explain and allow to understand – the historical city-making process. By conceiving them as distinct phases, yet inseparable from each other, they constitute a chained process outlining the real estate development processes operating in the city. In the light of these considerations, it is worth remarking the reliance of these three



**FIGURE 2.7.2** An example of social reproduction space for citizenship. The courtyard of the former barracks Kasárna Karlín (Prague) is partially reused as cultural space.

Source: Photograph by F. Camerin (December 2018).

processes one on each other as well as their strict link to the economic yield derived from the great industrial, military, and railway properties' outputs.

This analysis is also important to understand the metamorphosis of great industrial, military, and railway properties intended as 'capital in land'. Due to their characteristics, great properties are strictly related to the urban dynamics affecting the built environment, with special emphasis on its "central spaces". It is in central areas, in effect, where the capital in land is reproduced to the extent that the differential ground rent can strongly develop (Solà-Morales i Rubió *et al.* 1974: 3): great properties raise the interests of the real estate operators to "place" speculative values on them. For this reason, the construction-emptying-regeneration analysis is useful to understand the city making and the role great industrial, military, and railway properties play in these processes.

### **The Production-Construction of Great Industrial, Military, and Railway Properties**

The late-19th century- and early-20th-century making process of a specific urban area based on high-consuming-land industrial, military, and railway facilities is what can be called 'production of the built environment' (Edwards, Campkin and Arbaci 2009). In the phase of construction, numerous urban artefacts – equipment, facilities, services, or wealth-generating activities – were

placed in the city because they benefitted from the “economies of agglomeration” produced in the multifunctional areas where a diversity of productive processes came together.

This phase comprises a number of features. Firstly, industrial, military, and railway settlements can be intended as “rent seeking activities” which assume a huge responsibility in the production of the city. Secondly, being mostly public-owned assets, these settlements can be intended as game changers within the city-making process. In other words, they sought the existence of the city as a collective entity. Thirdly, all these activities required a large amount of land to develop their specific outputs, even in central areas or nearby them, thus being precise manifestations of the capital in land regardless of whether they were managed by private or public entities. Eventually, in this phase of the city-making process the urban space was being created and consolidated as a ‘social product’ (Knox 1982). This period coincided with the so-called “modern city” – i.e., the ‘capitalist city’ – whose foundations began to be laid between the mid-19th century and the early 20th century. In referring to capitalist city, the focus is on the European cities which work based on a remarkable role of finance and of land rent as generators of urban growth and socio-spatial transformation (Jäger 2003; Rossi 2010: 111).

The building of the high-consuming-land industrial, military, and railway settlements provides a first interpretation of the capitalist city. As stressed by Insolera (1989), it is important to emphasize that these urban plots played a fundamental role in the city’s socio-spatial configuration in strict relation to the city-making process. This relationship meant the occupation of a territory by a diversity of specific activities that remarkably influenced subsequent waves of urban development of the modern city. For instance, the presence of the railway offered an opportunity for industrial and military facilities, all of which boosted the real estate developments (Ministerio de Cultura 1980: 75).

The role of great properties in a specific urban area has substantially depended on the following issues (Camarin 2020: 79–104): the type of activity-function; the morphological configuration of the place in which great properties were located; the political-administrative decisions related to the functions; the relationships between the territorial bodies responsible for their presence in the territory (such as the Ministry of Defence and the Railway Companies); and the interaction of the agents-actors involved in their management and exploitation. As for such role, the construction of great properties has had a relevant part in the urban colonization of their surroundings, having even significantly contributed to the functional, social, and spatial segregation of the space they occupied. This is the case of industrial neighborhoods appearing across Europe in the second half of the 19th century (Arxiu Històric del Poblenou 2001).

In the construction phase, the city witnessed the territorial transformation of great properties neighboring areas. At the very local scale, such transformations took place as the relationship between property and capital in land encouraged the development of new activities, which could be seen as a sort of “manipulation” of the existing built environment (Lawrence and Low 1990). Great properties exercised a role of “spatial colonizers” and created new relations with the surrounding environment. At a wider level, i.e., the city as a whole, great properties appeared as specific settlements creating different use-values, thus influencing zoning processes derived from their presence in the city. Such properties acquired, therefore, a certain specificity at the level of the city so as to condition the functionality of the places they belong to. This role depended not only on the presence of industrial, military and railway artefacts, but also on their decisive influence on the shaping of new spatial developments.

Giving concrete examples, the construction of great industrial, military, and railway properties can be exemplified as follows. The railway and its stations acting as terminals for the exchange of people and goods has conditioned the settlement of industrial and military activities, as well as other equipment related to the production of the built environment. Industrial

and military activities, in turn, showed a specific behavior with regard to their implementation and the effects derived from their building.

On the one hand, industrial settlements required the presence of a nearby labor force for reasons of economy of means. Since its origins, the industrialization has developed in close coexistence with the working class. This coexistence depended on not only the absence of specific means of communication to help the social class to commute, but from the capitalist-fostered identification of the industrial social space with the most marginal sectors, i.e., the working-class. Following the late-19th-century urban development patterns, low-income classes linked to industrial activities were concentrated on the same place of the industries, thus creating “working-class peripheries” in the form of “red belts” (Álvarez Mora, Palomar Elvira and Sánchez Rodenas 1980: 147).

On the other hand, as military settlements gathered arsenals, barracks, and warehouses, these installations needed the railway for the tasks of transport of troops, combat vehicles, and weapons equipment. Military activities demanded the availability of certain type of materials and supplies, so they needed the availability of a local- and territorial-scaled network which configured one of the economic bases of the city (Más Hernández 2003). As well as industries, military settlements have contributed to the development of their surroundings through the “economies of agglomeration” effects (Remy 1966), thus generating new specialized jobs. For instance, military factories have always had an indirect influence on other metallurgical industries: both of them needed a reciprocal cooperation to maintain the military-metallurgical production.

### Emptying Strategies and Dispossession-Appropriation Process

Taking advantage of economic crises happening over time, the logic of capital seemingly opens the way to new forms of exploitation triggered by new technological developments and modernization of functionally outdated and obsolete production systems (Holloway and Picciotto 1977). These forms of exploitation encouraged the abandonment, emptying, reconversion or relocation of the activities located in the great properties, and subsequently contributed to the “transformation by regeneration” of the places they were located (Doron 2000). For this reason, high-consuming-land activities, such as industrial, military and railway, left their primordial location with which they were identified within the city. Their relocation, in the best of cases, took place in other peripheral sites, which Urban Planning had been in charge of “ordering” with appropriate business-oriented equipment. Another no less important reason of the displacement was the “low profitability” of industrial, military and railway activities in relation to those ones hypothetically provided by other functions. On this occasion, the new activities had to be related to the real estate development in order to produce profit-oriented spaces. In this way, a certain built element that did not offer an adequate profitability had to be dismantled, abandoned, and even ruined to force its reconversion-regeneration. However, this low profitability was not the driver of the change, but the new economic-financial perspectives. The latter allowed to recreate a new income-producing asset on the waste of the useless goods from the point of view of capital. The low profitability assigned to the built element consequently meant its dismantling and abandonment for undertaking new real estate developments. Building cities, in this sense, was not only manifested in their material construction, but also in those other situations developing a strategy of dismantling of the existing built environment. In order to implement such practice, specific real estate agents were mobilized, whose mission was to empty the contents of the “social space” out of the built elements. In particular, the social characteristics of these spaces were what set up the condition of “strategic places” propitious to undertake a process of socio-spatial ‘appropriation-reappropriation’ (Álvarez Mora and Camerin 2019: 18–19).



The appropriation was consistent with the need to create new profit-oriented spaces, whose impact was strengthening the segregated city.

Once the activities located in great properties started failing to produce the expected economic profit, its existence itself entered into “crisis”. The great property began to be the object of a real estate practice consisting in promoting the emptying of its functional contents. This process was about the “inadequacy” of the function the artefact exercises, which, it is said by logic of capital, did not correspond to the post-industrial society needs (Shaw 2001). The production of the “waste” was argued to be functional obsolescence, but it hid, as already pointed out, speculative reasons. The considerable expectations of the real estate developer–financial capital drove these processes of obsolescence–dismantling–emptying of specific urban sectors, and this aspect had been approached from various angles (see, among others, Oliva 1988). Great industrial, military and railway properties were located in places which ceased to be profitable if the “traditional customs” persisted there (Figure 2.7.3), so they needed to be replaced by the new productive requirements of capital. Once these sectors assumed a new role through an “appropriate” land use change, thus the “regenerative transformations” drove the high profitability required by the logic of capital.

In this socio-economic context, undertaking operations of obsolescence–dismantling–emptying meant to achieve a social appropriation of the places disaffected of the existing functions to submit the latter to “real estate–related future expectations”. In other words, great



**FIGURE 2.7.3** The former slaughterhouse in Rome, today partially reused as RomaTre university headquarters.

Source: Photograph by F. Camerin (October 2018).



**FIGURE 2.7.4** Urban void in place of the ancient 14.569 m<sup>2</sup>-sized “Precision Artillery Workshop” in Madrid’s city center to become a high-end residential block.

Source: Photograph by F. Camerin (February 2019).

properties stopped to perform their original activities for creating new profitable uses (i.e., high-end housing along with commercial, tertiary and – why not? – touristic activities, all of which off limits for lower classes) on the “ashes” of the past to be destroyed. This process of dismantling generated the so-called ‘urban void’ (Secchi *et al.* 1984), understood not exclusively as an “architectural-urban form” without content, but rather as the expression of a process of “possession-dispossession” of a certain space and of a property (Figure 2.7.4). Urban voids, which resembled a transitory form in the new way of shaping the late 20th-century city, were part of the history of the city.

An important feature of this phase is the role played by “urban narratives”, which seemed to provide not only ideological justifications for launching urban regenerations, but also for “convincing” militant groups that were trying to prevent or question such operations (van Hulst 2012). The ideological justifications aimed to appropriate the past, to steer and direct urban reconfiguration, and to lay the necessary foundations so that urban regeneration could be seen as indispensable in the eyes of the society. Urban narratives relied, as could not be otherwise, on the following triggering elements: “ordinary regulatory frameworks” (such as General Master Plans and zoning regulations); “exceptional instruments and actions” (for instance, large urban projects); and other measures based on “continuity” of the existing built environment (such as the “heritage protection-urban rehabilitation”) operations, or its “rupture” (as in the case of the “urban expansion-renewal” actions).

Urban narratives and storytelling were generally contained in the urban planning instruments to justify the genesis of an urban form solidly preserved, ruined, degraded, or converted into a plot. An example is the case of the former Guido Reni barracks regeneration into the new “City of Science”. As this barracks is characterized by the presence of unused buildings and artefacts unlikely to be reconverted into new uses, or with evident physical and functional degradation phenomena, its privileged localization and the consequently real-estate value due to its position, constitutes a relevant occasion of local and urban scale regeneration (Roma Capitale 2014).

In this context, shaping the empty can therefore be intended as one more expression of the historical city-making process. As argued by Álvarez Mora (2015: 47–60), the point made here is that the “void” should be understood as the result of a far-reaching process linked to the historical construction of the place in which it is contextualized: the void is not nothing. What is important to underline is the place’s value that had been created through the historical social actions to define the space and assign the (strategic) position of the great property surroundings. Great properties, in consequence, gradually acquired a remarkable value in the real estate market due to the historical social actions. The object of the appropriation was not only the great property, but the “place”: the “emptying” of its original contents is the necessary step to take in order to upgrade the social level of the place. Therefore, the emptying can be seen as a remarkable phase not so much as a process of appropriation of historical buildings, but rather as a usurpation of the “value” holding by a place.

In light of these considerations, urban voids can be intended as elements of conflict, arising from the intention to redevelop historical zones as profit-oriented spaces. In this respect, one can speak of a true “social expropriation” intended to “free” a great property from its contents because such features were in contradiction with the exchange-value assigned to it by the agents involved in the city government. In fact, urban voids were (and currently are) simply not “abandoned artefacts”, but the spatial expressions of the city-making process. The creation of urban voids can be claimed to be another way of conceiving the production of the built environment, being the expression of a city growing in leaps. In particular, the capitalist city created the “abandonment of what is built” as another way of producing value, i.e., the dismantling of great properties can be conceived as another real estate process (Doron 2000). No matter if such facilities remained useful for the most disadvantaged social groups, the logic of capital provoked their dismantling as it did not believe they were making the required profitability.

To sum up, this second process helps to understand the historical construction of the city as a real estate practice which built the “waste” to re-appropriate a social space. This mechanism constituted an unquestionable reference to comprehend the historical city-making process in the same way as the other processes contributed to its materialization as “built space”.

### **From Abandonment-Dismantling-Emptying to the Urban Regeneration of the Affected Artefacts-Properties**

The long path leading to the dismantling, abandonment, and ruin of those goods that originally “produced the city” eventually ended in the great properties – and their surroundings – regeneration, the objective of which has been the socio-spatial “appropriation” by the wealthy (Koven and Koven 2018). Urban renewal and regeneration have historically been linked to the extrapolation of the urban land rent: political and social agents supported such process to impose an “order” not being in contradiction with the logic of capital (Campos Venuti 1981). It is therefore a question of placing value on these capitals in land in order to obtain the maximum economic return from the urban areas which lacked value, but potentially possessed it. The implementation of urban regeneration processes made effective the upper-class appropriation of



the city, especially its central zones. From the post-WWII period, European cities center began to be manipulated by means of interventions seeking typological substitutions (Grebler 1962). These interventions caused the expulsion of its original population, arguing, for instance, that the volume of existing built environment was far below from what was permitted by the regulations of the Urban Planning instruments. The redevelopment of great properties via urban regeneration historically has been configured as a process of “social dispossession” of collectively created “urban values” (Álvarez Mora 1978). These values were historically created over time within specific communities which have used them and watched them over until today. This is the reason great properties can be conceived as heritage, so due to this status they should have been ineligible for individual-oriented appropriation by virtue of social justice.

From this perspective, urban regeneration processes can be understood as products generated in the heart of a consumer capitalist society. The capitalist-oriented action barely carried out projects for the community, choosing the creation of income-producing assets for the ‘city as product’ instead (Álvarez Mora and Camerin 2019: 22–24). The ‘city as product’ identified, in this case, the work and commitment of a society: it expressed its aspirations, strategies, and forms of domination. The manipulation of great properties and their surroundings into “areas of centrality” has been the result of urban regeneration processes through “urban large projects” (such as Barcelona’s Poblenou neighborhoods – Camerin 2019), the latter fostering new morphological-physical forms and socio-spatial configuration created in accordance with the political aspirations of the groups of power. Urban regenerations set up profit-driven spaces but, above all, contributed to the configuration of spaces that were increasingly distant from the rest of the city sociologically and economically speaking. These areas of centrality acted as “poles of attraction” making competitiveness between cities possible and eliminating the interaction with the citizenry. Urban regeneration should consequently be understood as a transforming mechanism to create a “city for others”, which means: being absent from conflicts showing its contradictions; pushing the “social and economic sanitation”; forcing functional obsolescence as a procedure leading to a socio-spatial possession; and creating high-end spaces as competitive elements but regardless of the interests and real needs of citizens. Urban regeneration processes have massively contributed to the consolidation of a segregated city, making it irreversible: in this framework, urban regeneration constituted a fundamental action for the “transformation-possession” of central-located land (Crouch, Fraser and Persey 2000). The contradictions of the ‘city as a product’, however, have been not so easy to eliminate, since the regenerated central areas have accumulated “business” and “prestige”, but also “inequality” and “marginalization”.

### **A Methodology for Understanding the Condition of the Capitalist City as “Historical Social Product”**

The construction-dismantling-regeneration analysis constitutes a way of approaching the capitalist city based on its production-reproduction processes. This chapter addresses three processes linked to the real estate development, i.e., to the building, abandonment, and regeneration of great properties, in order to show the spatial appropriation-reappropriation of the city. By investigating so, one can understand the condition of the city as “historical social product”. Due to this, the proposed analysis can be intended as a Marxist approach to the explanation of the European cities (Champagne 2018). This explanation, eventually, shows the dispossession to which the city has been submitted from the late 19th century onward and, consequently, the causes of socio-spatial segregation that European cities are facing today.

To sum up, two are the main contributions of this methodology. First, the proposed method constitutes an original analysis on the contemporary European cities based on the role of great

industrial, military and railway properties. Over time, the treatment of great properties has promoted the conversion of traditional urban spaces into exclusive areas. The analysis of the three processes leads to understand the insurmountable distances created over time by the profit-driven management of great industrial, military, and railway properties with respect to the rest of the city, improving the city image, and elevating both perishable and real estate products, and encouraging their exclusive use. In short, the path construction-abandonment-regeneration has promoted a classist, unsustainable society lacking social cohesion.

Second, the theoretical contribution of this chapter explains how, since the late 19th century, the capitalist city has been modelled by a system based on the interrelationship between urban development patterns, Urban Planning, and the management of the territorial government processes by public and private actors involved. This system has arguably changed the socio-economic and urban connotations of the European cities throughout decades (Dear and Scott 1981). A specific issue worth highlighting is the fact that urban development patterns mostly implied the construction of the city on the ground of real estate mechanisms responding to the interests of capital to create new profit-driven spaces. An essential step to understand the evolution of the capitalist city is therefore the dismantling, abandonment, and ruin intended as real estate processes ended in regeneration, all of which aim to strengthen the city as a space for the upper class. Specifically, the changes of the 19th-century traditional city on the ground of urban renewal and regeneration actions promoted the distortion of the collectively constructed built environment over time.

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