



International Conference – Alternative and Renewable Energy Quest, AREQ 2017, 1-3 February 2017, Spain

CONSERVATION OF THE URBAN HERITAGE AND SUSTAINABILITY: Barcelona as a Paradigm

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Abstract

The legislation in force provides for the protection of natural areas, not only for their scenic qualities but also as agricultural or environmental reserves. However, this strategic conservation of the rural landscape is not matched by similar conservation measures for the built fabric in large cities. This paper considers how to bring about, in a city with a major architectural heritage such as Barcelona, a programmatic change in a manner similar to what is happening in the rural environment, understanding and promoting the conservation of large urban areas as a form of strategic environmental conservation, as the reserving of area for the future and as part of an ecosystem.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the organizing committee of AREQ 2017.

Keywords: Heritage, adaptive reuse, Barcelona, building typology, legislation for the protection of architectural heritage.

1. Introduction

Over the course of the twentieth century, society has become increasingly aware of the need to preserve and conserve natural areas to prevent their degradation and to halt the innumerable attacks to which the industrial model of economic development has subjected the planet. To this end, the legislation for the protection of nature has gradually acquired more complexity.

While we can trace the most significant European precedents for this shift in perception to the First International Conference for the Protection of Nature, held in Bern in 1913, and the First International Congress on the Protection of Landscapes, including flora and fauna and natural monuments, which took place in Paris in 1923 (Feijo & Lorenzo, 2005)[1], it was not until the second third of the twentieth century that the concept of natural area was extended to include rural and agricultural areas shaped by human intervention as environmental reserves, given that human action

also configures the landscape, identity and biodiversity of an area. It has been shown that this type of ecosystem constitutes a heritage and cultural resource of the first importance for municipalities, for their socioeconomic development and for the quality of life of their citizens. Rural and agricultural areas help to balance urbanization, lessen the ecological footprint and bring the primary sector into closer contact with population centres, as well as contributing to the conservation and decongestion of other more significant areas with a much smaller capacity to accommodate urbanization.

In the case of Catalonia, in 1992 the autonomous regional government of the Generalitat drew up the Plan for Areas of Natural Interest, PEIN (*Pla d'Espais d'Interès Natural*), which only includes the 'natural areas', and it was not until the beginning of the present century that it begins to develop Special Plans for agricultural and rural areas. This is the case, for example, of the Special Plan for the protection and improvement of the Baix Llobregat Agricultural Park (*Pla Especial de protecció i millora del Parc Agrari del Baix Llobregat*)[2], finally adopted on 17 December 2003 and revised in 2015, which affects 15 municipalities in the Barcelona metropolitan area. Within eleven years there had been a shift from protecting only the natural areas of the Llobregat Delta to protecting and conserving the whole of the agricultural area (fig. 1). The new Special Plan defends the ability of this area to act as a green lung and as a natural area of great ecological wealth; and at the same time, it limits urban congestion in the metropolitan area, partially guarantees the supply of the area's food needs and encourages the existence of agricultural plots with social and recreational uses in a densely populated environment. The protection of this area is also concerned with halting the abandonment of many agricultural plots which were 'waiting' to be rezoned and, at the same time, with resisting the threatened implementation of major infrastructure and services linked to the development of the metropolitan area.

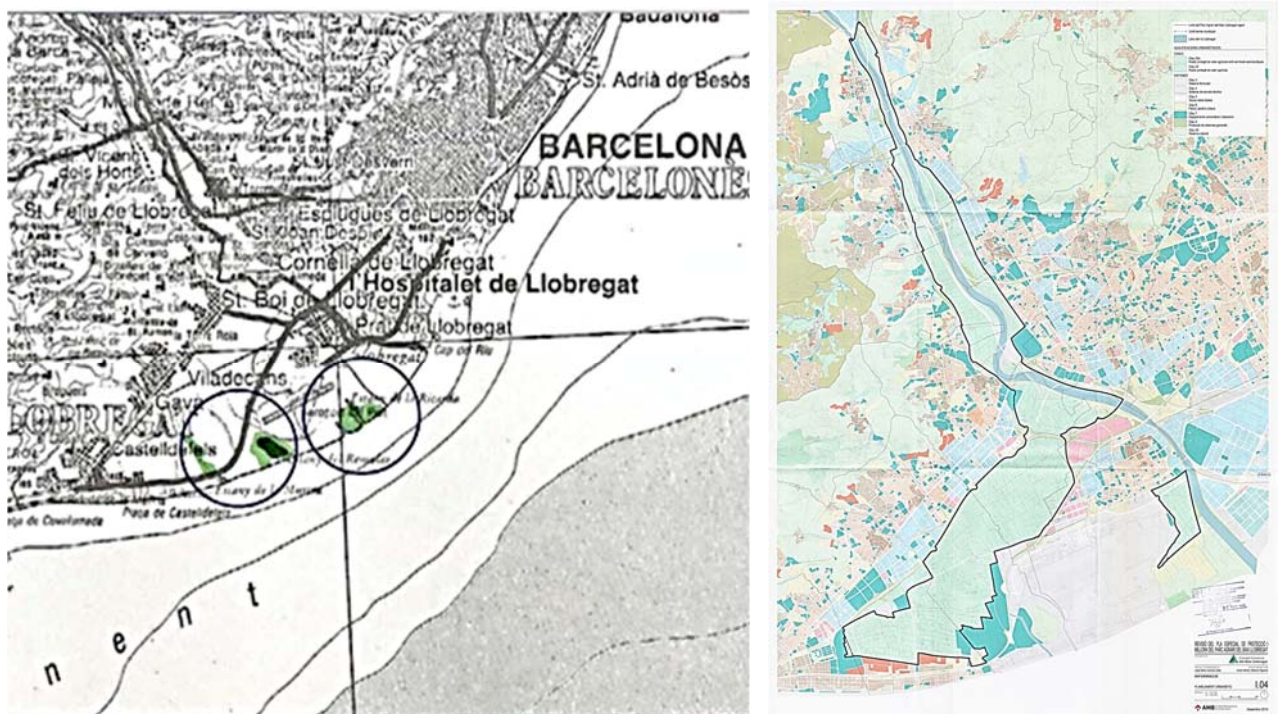


Fig 1. Comparative figure showing the area of the Llobregat Delta protected by the PEIN (1992) and the area protected by the Special Plan (2003).

However, this strategic conservation of the rural territory for environmental reasons and as a reserve of space for the future has no equivalent in most of the large cities, among these being Barcelona. As was the case in the first plans for the protection of the landscape or its 'natural monuments', in most cities it is only the 'monuments' that are protected: a few exceptional pieces of the architectural heritage or, at best, a few groups or ensembles. But as yet there is no sign of the programmatic shift towards the conservation of large sectors that is taking place in the rural territory,

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