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People, Places and History – Towards the Sustainability of Social Life in Traditional Environments¹

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1. Introduction

The study of the historical centres of cities has not attracted much attention, perhaps because they have been considered a “consolidated urban phenomenon”, or maybe for a number of other reasons. Nevertheless, they are places of great interest, liable to far-reaching transformations and innovations, with much social interaction, which varies over time, for they are generally inhabited by one group of individuals, the residents, and used and enjoyed by others, depending on their functionality, which is usually one of tourism, leisure and culture. And the most interesting point, as I shall try to point out, is that it is a phenomenon with characteristics and peculiarities common to many historical centres of medium-sized cities of southern Europe.

This article examines the characteristics, problems and solutions offered by historical centres in different cultural contexts. Before going into a general analysis, I offer a study of the case of the historical centre of the city of León, in Spain, which will allow us to reflect later and make proposals for the sustained development of such places.

León is a medium-sized city with a complex structure with a dominating urban characteristic reaching beyond the actual municipal boundaries. It forms, together with its suburbs, a small conurbation of nearly 180,000 inhabitants. It has two thousand years of history and is very attractive because of its situation in north-west Spain, an area where different peoples have settled and different cultures have developed over time. It is a centre of such important routes as the Pilgrim Route to Santiago, the Silver Route and the *Mesta* route of sheep transhumance. All this contributes to its cultural value and heritage of different periods and styles. Notable examples of this heritage are the 1st-century Roman city walls, St Isidore’s Basilica and the Royal Burial Vault of the Kings and Queens of León (12th century), the Gothic Cathedral (begun in 1255) and the 18th-century Renaissance San Marcos building, now a *parador* (state-run hotel). The old city, the walled area, is the Roman and Medieval enclave, with a history going back over two thousand years. The quarter is characterized by a great morphological, functional and social variety. It retains a major role

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in the life of the city owing both to its geographical location in the centre of the city and to its historical and cultural significance. The gradual process of degradation undergone in recent years has made it less competitive in comparison with other areas and new neighbourhoods of the city, which are more dynamic, despite the considerable efforts of the city council over the last ten years to maintain public spaces, buildings, lighting and other improvements, with the help of European financing. In this article, we shall analyse the problem of historical centres, general to many Spanish and Italian cities, and others of southern Europe.

Later, through the case study of the historical centre of the city of León, I shall concentrate on one of the most urgent problems for its people: habitability, housing and other indicators of sustainability. We consider that it is also possible to speak of the construction of sustainable cities through the situation of historical centres, for despite having their own life, they also form part of the rest of the city. By applying the criterion of sustainability, we shall discover how to achieve the city of tomorrow, the city of progress, while at the same time preserving and safeguarding our cultural heritage brought to us by the city's history.

The central methodological position of the discipline of anthropology is based on participatory observation, with in-depth interviews yielding qualitative information. We also use quantitative data obtained from a habitability survey, using indicators of sustainability, carried out in the city of León in 2004 under the auspices of the Re Urban Mobil Project and within the framework of research performed by the group led by Dr. Cervantes (2004 www.re-urban.com) for León City Council. The methodology of the survey is based on that of the UFZ-Centre for Environmental Research Leipzig-Halle. Over a total population of 5,364 living in 2,443 homes in the historical centre in 2004, 287 homes were contacted and 261 questionnaires were distributed, of which 206 were analysed, representing 8.4% of the homes and 3.8% of the population.

The information is completed from archives and other graphical sources, which allow us to corroborate data, along with bibliographical sources for purposes of comparison.

2. The situation and the problems of historical centres of medium-sized cities

Although the problems of historical centres are manifest and they are a constant source of preoccupation, they have received less attention than they deserve. Their situation has been tackled from different disciplines and in different countries and contexts. A recent review of the literature shows that the preoccupation aroused has come from different scientific angles and is present in diverse cultural contexts. Thus for example, Rossi (2004), writing on the process of urban change undergone by the centre of Naples over the last decade, examines the role of a number of local institutions, such as the judiciary, the new urban political elites, institutionalized civil society and urban social movements. They are the instigators of the dynamics of urban change "from above", and later of dynamics "from below". Another case from the same country is offered by Lo Piccolo (1996), who examines the different attempts to preserve and restore the historical centre of Palermo, a historical city with a unique cultural heritage, typical of the southern Mediterranean cities, for its setting, the wealth and variety of its architecture and its historical buildings, its characteristic habitational problems, and the different preservation plans implemented. More recently, Sancassiani (2005), from an optimistic standpoint, gives data about Italy in general, though with specific reference to

a survey on the implantation of Local Agenda 21. Maiques (2003) shows the configuration of the townscape of Valencia, Spain, another European Mediterranean city, from a historical perspective. The creation of an intellectual and political discourse based on biological and medical metaphors helps to create an image of urban society at a definite historical moment. Another case is the one offered by Williams (2002) on the “who”, “why” and “to what purpose” of the Historic Cairo Restoration Program, after many years of neglect. A different cultural context, but not for that less interesting, is offered by Middleton (2003), who says that recuperating a city through tourism is having some repercussions in Latin America, for example in Quito, the object of his study. The solutions offered may be similar to European ones, although he says that there could be some disadvantages to them if any type of social conflict arises to prevent their development.

But if we concentrate on the historical centres of many southern European cities, we shall see that they are characterized by a marked development during the second half of the twentieth century, more so in the last quarter. Reviewing these studies and the various institutional forums offering information on the progress and achievements within the development of European programmes and projects, and continuing previous studies (Fernández, 2000), I shall outline the situation of many historical centres similar to those of Bologna in Italy, León in Spain, Leipzig in Germany and Ljubljana in Slovenia, all participants in the Re Urban Mobil Programme; and a number of historical centres of medium-sized cities of southern Europe involved in Local Agenda 21, which offers strategies for changing many situations, including that of historical centres (<http://www.un.org/esa/sustev/documents/agenda21/index.htm>) plus other cities that are signatories to the Aalborg Charter (<http://www.sustainable-cities.org>).

It could be argued that the analysis of the period 1960-1990s shows the typical development of many of these cities, as well as in León: the resident population is mainly aging, generally working class, with housing units occupied by a single person paying a low rent, a situation which would seem to have prevented investment in renewal. In the most degraded parts of old districts, where the buildings are on the verge of ruin, the people largely belong to low-income groups and even socially excluded ones. There are often small shops and craftsmen's workshops recalling the economic activities of bygone days, generally the Middle Ages. Aging is therefore accompanied by a functional residualness, a step towards the socio-economic degradation of a neighbourhood, with the planning and social consequences of a social and functional vacuum. The progressive aging and social exclusion of the residual population are factors that have contributed to the decay of neighbourhoods, brought on by the low purchasing power of the population and progressive impoverishment of economic and social relationships. The tendency of the last few years has generally meant a progressive loss of population, which has given rise to the replacing of the original social group of the area. Poverty and the decay of accommodation pushed all those who could afford it to other parts of the city, which meant that those remaining belonged to low-income groups.

Another common phenomenon in historical centres has been the inability to bring about a social unification of all the residents of the neighbourhood. Furthermore, the arrival of new ones implies a structural division within it into old and new residents. The latter are on the road to exclusion, favoured by the fact that the unity of the group, if indeed it can be called

that, mainly made up of the elderly, is based on tradition and common symbols, and on the knowledge afforded by years of living in the area. In the case of Spain, for the period in question, there were half a million people living in historical centres, with characteristics like those already mentioned, that is an elderly population with major shortcomings in services and accommodation, with a mean unemployment rate of 27.6% and 21.6% of the population with only elementary education. They are the only areas with a major amount of rented accommodation (44.5%) and a high proportion of empty dwellings (21.3%) (<http://habitat.aq.upm.es/doc.html>). In general, over half of the residents were born outside the municipal boundaries and are of low social classes. A quarter of the houses were lying empty and of those occupied, only 25% were owner-occupied. About 40% were severely dilapidated.

An analysis of references showed us that the areas in question had suffered deterioration in building and planning quality as well as falling behind socially and environmentally, some of them affected by social exclusion, an increase in the elderly population and people with low resources, neglect of buildings by well-off, etc. this brought about a crisis of economic activity, with the loss of traditional activities, the occupation by marginalized groups of buildings with inadequate sanitation that made them difficult to live in, and a consequent proliferation of tenement slums. The social image of these areas fell, and this deterioration gradually spread to neighbouring districts.

To this situation of depopulation and neglect there must be added the difficult problem arising from the new functionality being acquired by these neighbourhoods, now leisure areas, with an increasing number of bars and restaurants, which in principle met the demand of a cultural tourist sector offered by the area through the historical buildings and museums normally situated in such areas. This saturation of bars and the like, and their impact on night life and their concentration in certain parts of historical centres has discouraged new residents from entering the areas, along with other commercial functions and services. What we have seen is that the rehabilitation of these areas has become a pressing question, for they needed a very careful reformation in order not to affect their historical atmosphere and character and increase their vitality, and even their picturesqueness (various authors, *Places to Live*, 2003).

A similar process in these southern European centres, according to another study about León, (Fernández, 2000) has consisted, as the catastrophic tendency has waned, in new population groups coming into these districts, and not only the socially excluded, ethnic minorities or foreigners in precarious employment situations. Attracted by the gradual processes of restoration, young professional people are moving in, choosing these areas for their accessibility and central position. Moreover, the rehabilitation plans carried out have generally formed part of public programmes with European funding, mainly through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), such as those mentioned above (Urban, Re Urban, etc.) They have the advantage of setting up networks of cities with similar problems, affording the possibility of information exchanges and synergies (http://europa.eu.int/comm/regional_policy/intro/regions1_en.htm).

The effects have been varied and, at times, limited, mainly in small and medium-sized cities. The positive effects have served to establish guidelines for renovation, and grime, filth and damp have gradually given way to colour. The preservation of historical centres has become

an aesthetic task, whereby the historical and artistic city is rediscovered for citizens and tourists alike. Carefully chosen light colours for façades have become a visible sign of this recuperation, which we trust is not just a facelift. Another characteristic tendency has been pedestrianization, with non-residents' cars being denied entry, and space thus being liberated for citizens to walk around and enjoy the historical buildings.

On the other hand, however, there has always been a noticeable division of the subgroups living in historical centres, which means that they fail to achieve the group identification necessary for solving problems facing all of them, while bringing out their socio-economic diversity and multiculturalness.

3. The historical centre of the city of León

After this brief overview, we shall now concentrate on the case of León, where, after a period of lethargy, the strategies applied are fairly typical of those outlined above.

In León, three factors come together which, according to J. Borja (1997, 2003), are necessary for the success of urban transformation projects: the sensation of acute crisis brought on by the awareness of the globalization of the economy, the harmonization of public and private urban key players together with the generation of local leadership (both political and civic), and the joint will and consensus of the citizens for the city to take a step forward, both physically and socio-economically and culturally.

Thus, León, with the brokerage of the council and the impulse of the global macroeconomic current imposed and facilitated by the European Union, and under the auspices of the Regional Development Fund, in the 1990s, sought the revitalization of its old quarter but with criteria that in some way were imposed on it from outside. Thus arose the Urban pilot project "Building León: a Development Proposal for the Old City 1995-1999", which, while also potentially applicable to other historical cities centres in the European Union, sought to bring new life to the historical centre of León. It was felt necessary to involve young people and revitalize the economy of the area by attracting small and medium-sized firms, and to improve the quality of life of the residents. In this way, the historical centre would not merely be a collection of historical buildings for tourists and visitors but the living district that it historically used to be, a place with its own identity and, in short, the definite and dynamic urban reality which, also historically, it has sought through the consensus of physical, social and economic structures. Furthermore, these projects include the idea of competitiveness at different levels, both internal, within the city, and external, with other similar cities, both Spanish and European. And this idea of competitiveness has made itself very much felt in the territorial debate, according to Díaz Orueta (1997). Because of it, and in line with globalizing and subsidy-based policies, there has been an on-going struggle to attract investment. Much effort has been made to modernize infrastructures, and much money has been spent on defining strategies to determine the place León should take in the hierarchies of cities.

The work of social and political groups functioning in the district, which has had partial and isolated successes in line with Rossi's ideas (2004), is to be interpreted as directed at organizing the group and establishing an infrastructure for social dynamics leading to co-existence, solidarity and an improvement of the quality of life. A significant case was the

“León Típico” Residents’ Association, which had a major social and political impact (Fernández, 1997), originally based on opposition to the previous political regime in its struggle for the artistic and cultural heritage of the district. But now, because of the absolute lack of stimuli, and the loss of interest of the citizenry, it has largely given up solidarity to concentrate on improving the quality of life. This means peace, being able to enjoy a walk, no noise at night and, if necessary, the possibility of bringing charges against annoying bars or other premises causing any kind of nuisance (noise, drugs, and so on). But this piecemeal work, though positive, must include a search for alternatives to the stagnation of the problems of the resident population.

The Urban pilot project had praiseworthy aims, for it sought the recuperation of the historical centre as an active and integral part of the city, while giving it a live role, in order to avoid it becoming a merely monumental centre, and improved the appearance and sanitation of the district with a pneumatic system of refuse collection. It did not, however, solve the structural problems concerning the aging population, the situation of its housing, or the functionality of the area as one for night life, which quite definitely affected the quality of life through noise pollution. These are the main problems facing the old quarter of León and those which the residents consider the most worrying.

Specifically, the residents mention such problems as the deficient state of their homes, the loss of crafts and commercial activities, an aging population and the abandonment of the area as one of residence, in relation to its night life, which engenders high levels of pollution, especially at weekends. Although the old quarter is set in the centre of the city of León, major functional changes have taken place in it and in the city as a whole: as a place of residence it is in decline, as 1900 residents have left in the last ten years; there has been a loss of activity as a result of the changes in the location of administrative services; religious and educational functions have been run down, though not as regards space, owing to the drop in the number of students and in the numbers of residents of religious homes and convents. On the other hand, art, culture and tourism have grown in importance. Trade has been strengthened in some of the better-known streets, which have been renovated, but to the detriment of other parts of the district, where it has disappeared altogether. The southern part of the old quarter, known as the *Barrio Húmedo*, or “Damp Quarter” retains its major role as a night spot. Bars, restaurants and discothèques take up most of the business premises, almost to the exclusion of other shops or services, causing much nuisance to residents through the great amount of noise generated at night.

As has already been said, the population of the historical centre was 5,364 in 2004. Over 60s account for a third of the total, at 1,832. Another significant fact that we observed is that 16% of the homes are occupied by people living alone. Although the population is mainly an aging one, young professional people are moving in, as there are signs of the rehabilitation of the area. Although most of the population comprises Spanish nationals, at given moments, foreign immigrants and ethnic minorities have set up in this area owing to the availability of cheap housing, usually with deficient sanitation. At present, foreigners account for only 3% of the population.

As for the socio-economic structure, over 85% of the population has at least received primary education, 34.6% having been to university. Although a variety of occupations are represented, 27.8% of the population is retired.

The district's central position means that the normal way of getting about within the city is walking, 70.4% of the population using this means, with journey times of 15-20 minutes, although half of the homes have one car and 18% have two while a third have none. In turn, of those who have cars, half have access to garage space or pay for a parking place, while the other half leave their vehicles parked in the streets, which causes thoroughfare problems because of the recent pedestrianization of a number of streets.

Fieldwork shows that one of the means of creating cohesion in the quarter is through the mutual personal acquaintance of residents. The certainty of meeting the same people every day creates affinity, which is borne out by statistics: more than a quarter of the residents of the old city (25.7%) have lived there all their lives, and the remainder have been there for varying periods, ranging from 10-25 years (18%), 6-10 years (11.2%) to under 5 years (10.2%). Of those who have moved into the area, over half (54.3%) said that the accommodation was what they wanted, that the centre was near, and a third said that their places of work or study were near. Regarding social life in the quarter, most residents consider themselves fairly or very involved in it, which contrasts with the fact that most of them find out what is happening in the area through the local press or television and radio, while 10.3% find out from the residents' association, 4.6% from the parish church and a few (4.1%) because they see what happens personally. Just over half (54.4%) do not feel adequately informed about local issues. A similar percentage (54.6%) say that they know of some association at work in the area like the residents' association, a social or community grouping working for the district or for some sector such as tradesmen or caterers, or for the local heritage or NGOs. Nevertheless, the real percentage of active participation in the life of the district is only 17.9%, as opposed to 82.1% who say that they do not participate.

Relationships between residents may be said to be good, and over half of them (53.3%) say that they have relatives or friends in the area, and see them often, perhaps daily and at least weekly. Half of the residents of the old town would recommend others to move into the area, for its central position and convenience, although they would not recommend it from the noise point of view.

Most of the residents are owner-occupiers (61.2%). Given the age of the buildings, few upper flats have lifts, only 15.5%, and the same may be said for central heating (12.1%), and that in a city where the weather is cold for 8 months of the year. 68.4% of residents tend to use diverse types of gas, diesel, coal and electric fires and heaters.

The level of satisfaction of residents of the area with their housing is very variable. The main complaints concern the condition of the roofs and ceilings, heating and the quality of the windows, all of which are connected with the external environment (climate, noise pollution, age of the buildings, etc.).

Another source of complaints is the lack of facilities for children, of play areas, and the excess of noise at night, together with the lack of services for the elderly and of cultural activities and facilities. The points of greatest satisfaction are the numbers of restaurants and cafés, street cleaning and the novel system of pneumatic selective refuse disposal, installed under the auspices of the Urban pilot project.

But the general feeling among the residents is one of improvement, especially over the last few years, at least as far as outward appearances are concerned, as in this regard, the

changes have been far-reaching. This has been helped by the policy of pedestrianization, as the removal of motor traffic has improved the quality of the environment, while the renovation of streets, squares and façades has improved the general appearance. But the main problem, nocturnal noise pollution, has yet to be solved. It may also be the source of another problem, vandalism directed against renovated street furniture.

The perception of the district's future for most residents (60.4%) is positive, while a minority of 19% consider it negative. Despite this, answers about the future of the quarter are equally divided into those who think that it will be restored, and that it will have nothing but bars and restaurants, and those who think that it will depend on the will of the council and of the politicians in power at any given moment. It is significant that 18.5% of the people would move to another district if they could, because of the problem of noise at night, especially at weekends.

In short, we have found some positive feelings among the population of the historical centre regarding a gradual recuperation of the population (which is false, as the statistics show), the accessibility of the city centre, improvements brought about by the pedestrianization of certain areas, improvements to façades and streets and the area's becoming attractive as a residential one because of its architecture and historical setting. Also mentioned are the social atmosphere, the air quality, the cleanliness of the streets and the system of refuse disposal, together with good relations among residents, the number of bars and restaurants, a favourable opinion concerning the overall situation of the last few years and positive feelings regarding the district's future as a residential area. Negative feelings recorded concentrate on the excessively aged population and the number of homes with over sixties living alone and who depend on their old-age pensions, which are usually low. There is also some unrest concerning the state of housing, usually with regard to its age, the conditions of the streets and pavements, the levels of noise at night, the lack of green areas and trees, of children's play areas, of cultural and leisure facilities and of public social centres, activities for the young, sports fields, centres for the aged and public social centres in general, together with the physical state of buildings, poor access to information, and so on.

4. Towards the sustainability of historical quarters

It has now become quite necessary to apply the criterion of sustainability to city planning and development. At the world level, one of the initiatives of the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 was to foment local initiatives to support sustainable development. In Europe, the Treaty of Amsterdam of 1999 confirmed in articles 2 and 6 that balanced and sustainable development, together with the protection and improvement of the environment, were basic aims of the European Union. The criterion of sustainability, however, has not been felt excessively in historical cities, which are in the process of change and development.

Brugmann (1992) and Tjallingii (1995) proposed considering the city as an ecosystem and using ecological concepts to understand the problems of urban sustainability and find solutions for them. It is certainly true that advances are being made in the construction of the city, approaching the aims of sustainability, of a modern and dynamic city developing in an attractive setting, and one that is healthy from the environmental point of view. Through a strategy of integration of the environmental elements of different sectorial policies, a kind

of progress is being sought that satisfies the needs of the present without jeopardizing the ability of future generations to satisfy their own needs.

One of the typical sustainability proposals that we have seen applied in many historical centres has been the freeing of spaces from traffic. As motor traffic is the main source of urban atmospheric pollution, action must be taken to reduce its impact. As an example, Handy and Clifton (2001) have evaluated the possibility that providing local shopping opportunities will help to reduce automobile dependence. Although local shopping does not show great promise as a strategy for reducing automobile use, but it does show promise as a strategy for enhancing quality of life in neighbourhoods, at least partly by making driving once again a matter of choice. The topic has a complex solution, because, as Black, William R., and Peter Nijkamp (2002) say, “solutions will succeed or fail on the basis of social response”. As emissions cannot be stopped altogether, for it is impossible to prohibit all traffic, an effort must be made to rationalize and improve the quality of air through innovative traffic policies, the use of noise-reducing surfaces and public transport policies directed at the improvement of the environment, although, as we have seen, where traffic noise has been eliminated, other forms of noise pollution have taken its place.

Nevertheless, I believe that the role of sustainability in the study of historical centres of this type need not be limited to environmental questions. It would seem necessary to bear in mind other kinds of indicator which in principal could be considered as emerging, such as society and culture, principally in the historical areas that we are dealing with, where taking the old town as a consolidated fact has caused other aspects just as basic to the lives of the citizens to be forgotten. We shall thus be able to bring out the value of the city as a cultural heritage, as a living place, one of co-existence, of commercial and cultural exchange, of the exchange of knowledge, a seat of institutions and a place of leisure. This must also be translated into actions capable of recuperating the normal aspects and activities of the historical city, which are the basis of its formation and development, and which are at risk of disappearing as the result of the burgeoning development of suburbia, with alternatives for coexistence totally detached from the traditional urban nucleus.

In this regard, one of the aspects to consider is the concentration of the cultural heritage characterizing historical cities, especially their old quarters. This fact determines their close association with a growing type of tourism: cultural tourism, or, more specifically, “heritage tourism”. This is the case that Ian Strange (1999: 302) explores. He presents the argument that in some places attempts to reconcile the potentially conflicting and incompatible demands of urban competitiveness and urban sustainability are being pursued through the application of sustainable development policies to the management of local environmental and historical assets. He shows analyses the varying ways in which policy makers in historic cities are engaging in action to regulate localised patterns of economic and physical growth. Indeed, a major dilemma for many small- to medium-sized historic cities revolves around the simultaneous need to manage the conservation of the physical fabric of the city and accommodate the pressures associated with an expanding range of economic development and tourist-related activities and functions. Nevertheless, not all urban heritage is a resource for tourism, and not all spaces attract visitors or offer any significant use for tourism. There are other spaces in the historical quarters which are also lived in, and which have value for the collective memory of the residents. Evidence tells us that the rehabilitation of certain spaces with a monumental or historical value has been to the detriment and neglect of areas

without such value. It cannot be denied that the association of culture, tourism and historical cities has obvious advantages for communities and the places that are home to them, such as income from visitors, the physical and functional renovation of the areas in question, and so on, but it also has a number of negative effects of growing importance. As far as space is concerned, these effects are especially felt in a small part of the old city defined as a “historical city of interest to tourists”. Together with the advocacy of urban sustainability, there arises the need for models of tourism development able to maximize the benefits and minimize the costs of attracting tourists, especially in the more fragile and vulnerable sectors. Likewise, a better flow of information concerning the projects and programmes in any way affecting the neighbourhood and its inhabitants will contribute to social sustainability, while also stimulating the participation of the citizens in the face of the tendency for today’s society to become less and less solidarity-minded, as we have seen in the countryside. Of course, it would be desirable to enhance local management with integrated decision making involving public and private institutions and the community at large. In many Local Agenda 21 cities, an opportunity to renew, innovate and increase the processes of participation is arising in this way. The community’s involvement in these processes of gradual and strategic change is a fundamental condition for their success. In this regard, Agenda 21 offers a forum and processes that could strengthen the community. Some Spanish cities, such as Barcelona and Granada, or even, Swedish (Adolfsson Jörby, 2002) or Austrian (Astleithner and Hamedinger, 2003, and Narodoslowsky, 2001) or Italian ones, as borne out by Sancassiani’s recent study (2005) have approached them as governance experiences, where different key players take part in the processes and take on their share of the joint responsibility regarding the shared goals. These are, then, participative processes directed at establishing a different relationship between the local authorities and the various social actors at work.

Another point to consider is the increased value of the built-up city and the improvement of its infrastructures, fomenting their recycling and preserving the architectural heritage. This would enrich cultural identity, while improving the aesthetic quality of the townscape. Generating urban diversity and complexity (in residence, economic activity, culture and services) would help to reduce the need for mobility, which would make the city more attractive as a place to live, work and offer services. The substantial improvement of living conditions and social cohesion, and of quality of life (housing, education, work, health, culture, leisure, and so on) would help us to regain the idea of a city as a common project of its citizens.

Likewise, there arises the need to stimulate economic dynamism, which would be helped by the setting up of workshops and schools of traditional activities linked with the area, such as restoration, plastic arts, crafts, etc., where education and training would be a first step towards economic consolidation. In this concern, Summers, M., Childs, A., Corney, G. (2005) show the case of education for sustainable development (ESD) in initial teacher training. They find that schools are not yet well developed as sites for student teacher learning in the domain; student teachers generally have greater understanding of sustainable development than their mentors; geography mentors perceive themselves to be better prepared for mentoring in this area than their science counterparts (who feel ill-prepared); for both students and mentors, there are significant gaps in understanding of education for sustainable development. The transmission to lower levels may be significant also. But

certainly, it is not possible to base sustainability only on souvenir shops in the daytime and bars and restaurants at night. While on the subject of education, I would suggest that there should be education in ethics for the young, together with alternatives to alcohol-based nocturnal leisure in bars and discothèques that are open well into the small hours of the morning. Such measures could be evening sports activities and a management of culture allowing for a more affordable culture for young people. The noise pollution caused by existing leisure activities is a new source of annoyance in these cities, and, as we have seen, many historical centres that have managed to rid themselves of the noise generated by traffic are suffering from the noise produced by the aggressive spread of nocturnal leisure. It is certainly true that southern European cultures, especially Mediterranean ones, and noticeably in Spain, are characterized by celebrations and street life, and therefore by rowdy open-air partying. But it is just as true that in our cultural environment, noise is becoming more and more a source of urban annoyance. There is a problem of the proliferation of fixed points of noise pollution such as discothèques, bars, open-air terraces and other leisure-time activities. The conflict between the right to rest and the right to leisure and social relationships is generating new urban unrest, in some cases of a serious nature, which is making it necessary to set up mechanisms of dialogue, shared responsibility and arbitration. However, the socio-cultural life of such places is also an asset that makes them attractive and contributes to local vitality and vibrancy in a way that buildings and artefacts do not, (and is not easily separated into what is either critical or tradable capital). In this particular case, communication channels must be opened up between those who run bars and shops, youth groups and residents to find a solution based on the satisfactory compromise of rights. In this regard, in the local setting, campaigns of awareness, education and environmental information have an effective background for generating social change, for it would seem that they get feedback from processes of community participation and are more permeable to the influence of ecological and environmental organizations. Therefore, cities play a basic role in changing their citizens' habits and values regarding the new paradigm of sustainable development.

Most of these problems are typical of the historical centres of our cities. But we might consider that the solution to many of them depends on transforming these historical centres into places of convergence where there are activities with an obvious function within the framework of the city as a whole. Considering and studying them in a piecemeal way and in isolation will give us a sectorial view, with an obvious dysfunctionality leading to degradation and destruction through their separation from the rest of the city. They will have to be considered within global strategies, at the same level as the rest of the city and its zones of influence, as part of a cultural legacy belonging to the whole community and forming part of a dynamic process in which the old city has a number of attributes that can neither be repeated nor regained. When the elderly people of the area speak to us of bygone days, of time immemorial, what is really essential is the message: the proclamation of the prestige and age of the city, the idea of a past with a presence in the present. But the most interesting thing is how they cling on to them emotionally. This is all the clearer when they tell their personal experiences, however disastrous. As long ago as 1946, Annoni pointed out that the historical centres of cities collaborated in the development of a modern town, insofar as they offer culture, rest and leisure. This obliges us to find a concept of Historical Centre within the context of the city, not just to preserve its history, but also to look after its social life.

Now may be the time to consider again the city as a joint project, as a space for human relationships, as a place where there will inevitably be conflicts, which can and must be resolved via consensus and not by the imposition of a dominating element, by applying to problems created over a long period of time solutions that are not quantified in units of time measured by political legislatures. But above all, it is fundamental that we should seek a project of a city for the future from a more comprehensive point of view than today's, transcending the interests of political parties and economic groups, with our sights always on the people. In short, what is sought is to maintain, or even regain the original urban structure of the city as an area that is lived in, and stressing the value of the historical centre and its importance in the development of the city.

5. Conclusion

The historical centres of cities still have their character as multifunctional areas but the pace of renovation of facilities is quite slow and this impedes competition with other more dynamic neighbourhoods.

In the object of our study, the old city of León, through its historical buildings, it is a symbol of the whole city and the seat of many of its urban, social and cultural values. Moreover, it is a dynamic urban reality which throughout history has striven to strike a balance between physical, social and economic structures. The old city is living through a critical situation where there are obviously many difficulties when it comes to finding an operational model that allows it to get away from the cycle of physical, social, cultural and functional deterioration.

The residents of the historical area have lived there for a long time and many of the old buildings are inadequate and occupied by single people living alone. There is a low percentage of young people, and hardly any in middle age. Although over half the population feel that the district has improved in general over the last few years, people would like to see green spaces, public, social and cultural services, shops, more trade in general and anything that will give more daytime life to the area.

In this regard, we have drawn up a proposal of sustainability for areas of this type which, through criteria of culture and society, seeks to contribute to revitalizing the commercial and leisure activities normal in a consolidated city, by means of specific actions like the maintaining of the resident population, encouraging the refurbishment of old homes, along with the preservation of their topological characteristics and their adaptation to the demands of today's life, and attracting new generations so that they will, together with the present population, guarantee the survival of activities and urban co-existence. Furthermore, one of the greatest problems detected is the danger that these historical centres will become mere monumental areas with an exclusively museum-like character, which leads us to conclude that it is important to integrate historical centres in the daily life of whole cities.

Our cities require sustainability, and to achieve it, we need changes in our concept of what a city should be, and to reconsider the way decisions are made regarding certain policies and new outlooks on how to get tomorrow's problems into a political debate focussed on today. This is an urgent task which requires specific commitments and a great capacity to learn.

Many of the challenges and problems mentioned will only be sorted out (legal, fiscal and regulatory policies aside) with a new social consensus allowing for a change in attitudes and daily behaviour patterns of most of the people. The historical city is the background to the processes of collective identification, of belonging, which creates community, and it is in that community environment that new alliances of sustainability must be created. The positive role of local government and of the city as a whole are, owing to their proximity and permeability, generally recognized, but there is still a long way to go. And the way is not without obstacles, for as humans we have to recognize that we are all somewhat contradictory and we want a lot of things at the same time. But we must remain aware of the demands that the discourse on urban sustainability creates if we want more than well-meaning rhetoric.

The cultural standpoint, and that of Europe's historical heritage, should regain the taste for human projects, advocating the city of Erasmus (quoted by A. Clayton and N. Radcliffe, 1994), who, far better than modern town-planners and humanists, recognized that the ultimate goal of any discipline had to be the improvement of the quality of life of the human being in a development compatible with Nature and the environment.

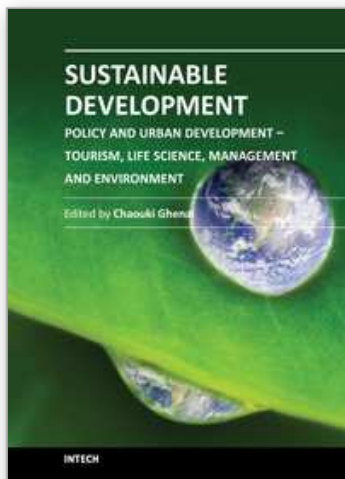
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The technological advancement of our civilization has created a consumer society expanding faster than the planet's resources allow, with our resource and energy needs rising exponentially in the past century. Securing the future of the human race will require an improved understanding of the environment as well as of technological solutions, mindsets and behaviors in line with modes of development that the ecosphere of our planet can support. Sustainable development offers an approach that would be practical to fuse with the managerial strategies and assessment tools for policy and decision makers at the regional planning level.

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