

The rise and fall of strategic urban projects as an instrument of urban regeneration in European cities

Auge y crisis de los proyectos urbanos estratégicos como instrumento de regeneración urbana en ciudades europeas

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Abstract

The rise of strategic urban projects (SUPs) in the last decades of the 20th century was favoured by a series of political and economic factors, as well as a consequence of the urban planning theories of the time. In these European projects, even with their logical differences and local specificities, both in the urban structure and forms and in the sphere of productive activities, it is possible to find similar objectives, characteristics, strategies and processes. In many cases, the SUPs have achieved a large part of their objectives, although they have also been criticised, especially by academics. The economic crisis and the change of urban paradigms, with greater environmental awareness and public participation, led to a rethinking of their suitability as an instrument for large-scale intervention and urban regeneration in central areas, resulting in a change of model. This article makes a critical review of the SUPs, as well as their efficiency and current validity, drawing lessons that can be used for new strategies for cities in the 21st century.

Keywords

Strategic projects, urban processes, mega-events, flagship projects, urban projects.

Resumen

El auge de los proyectos urbanos estratégicos (PUE) en las últimas décadas del siglo XX se vio favorecido por una serie de factores políticos y económicos, así como consecuencia de las teorías urbanísticas del momento. En estos proyectos europeos, aún con sus lógicas diferencias y especificidades locales, tanto en las formas y estructuras urbanas como en la esfera de las actividades productivas, es posible encontrar unos objetivos, características, estrategias y procesos similares. En muchos casos, los PUE han conseguido gran parte de sus objetivos, aunque también han recibido críticas, sobre todo desde el ámbito académico. La crisis económica y el cambio de paradigmas urbanos, con una mayor conciencia ambiental y de participación pública, hicieron replantearse su idoneidad como instrumento para la intervención a gran escala y la regeneración urbana en áreas centrales, produciéndose un cambio de modelo. El presente artículo realiza una revisión crítica de los PUE, así como su eficiencia y vigencia actual, extrayendo lecciones que puedan servir para las nuevas estrategias que abordan las ciudades en el siglo XXI.

Palabras clave

Proyectos estratégicos, procesos urbanos, mega-eventos, flagship projects, proyectos urbanos.

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Introduction

In the last decades of the 20th century, in the field of European urban regeneration actions, an extensive development of urban projects of a strategic nature took place. We refer to actions characterised by their large scale, mix of uses, programmatic complexity, emphasis on the design of public space, multiplicity of the agents involved, with a public but short-term initiative, a joint vision of the city and the objective of generating an urban impact that would cover, both in the urban structure and forms and in the sphere of productive activities, not only the area of action but, in a synergistic way, a large part of the city. They were mainly implemented in central or peri-central areas of cities with a high infrastructural component, be it railway, industrial land or disused river and sea ports. Their urban potential within the city was combined with the desire to singularise these interventions through urban projects with architectural quality. Portas¹ considers them as an evolution in the complexity of urban projects and calls them “third generation”, considering in a first phase the urban projects of Team X and in a second phase the projects carried out in Italy in the 1970s and in Barcelona or Berlin in the 1980s. Monclús² refers to them as long-range urban projects, complementary to one-off urban regeneration operations. By urban project we mean those actions defined, according to Solá-Morales,³ by their characteristics such as territorial effects wider than the area of action itself; a complex character, involving a mixture of uses and temporal rhythms; their intermediate scale, to be executed within a limited time frame; a desire to create the architecture of the city, independently of the architecture of the buildings and an important public component, both in the intervention of the buildings and in the uses envisaged in the programme. As Ezquiaga⁴ points out, the urban project would not be a new conception, as he considers as such the opening of Regent’s Street in London in 1812, or Berlage’s Zuid Plan in Amsterdam in 1915, in the sense of incorporating architecture as a unitary and intrinsic element of urban action. Therefore, we would not be dealing with such a novel operation, but rather with the recovery and evolution of an already experienced mode of action that had fallen into disuse in previous decades.

These projects are considered strategic because, on the one hand, they are located in central or peri-central areas with the potential to dynamise the economy of cities and regions. On the other hand, they are locally implemented projects with the aim of stimulating a new cultural or economic specialisation of the urban system.⁵ Due to their scale, they are implemented over a longer period of time. To the already defined characteristics of the urban project, they combine different tools, planning processes and strategic planning,⁶ resulting in a more adequate tool to deal with the complexity and scale of the new contexts. They share characteristics with the large urban projects defined by Carmona,⁷ the *megaprojects*⁸ or the *large-scale development projects* (IsUDPs) analysed by Moulart et al⁹ and Pagliarin et al,¹⁰ although none of these denominations fully coincide with the typology considered here. For Carmona, large projects are the result of globalisation and modify the relationship between markets and the state, giving cities the leading role as the locomotive of economic development. Portas also calls them plan-projects, referring to the biunivocal and non-hierarchical relationship established between the plan and the project.

These are not integrated urban regeneration actions, as they act in areas previously occupied mostly by productive uses or infrastructures. We refer rather to the concept of urban regeneration described by Moya, as “a process aimed at improving physical and spatial aspects of an urban area considered as degraded. The term ‘urban regeneration’ does not imply, a priori, a specific intervention strategy, beyond the physical nature of the intervention, and encompasses the

- 1 Nuno Portas, “El surgimiento del proyecto urbano”, *Perspectivas urbanas* 3 (2003): 1-11.
- 2 Javier Monclús, “The Barcelona Model: an original formula? From Reconstruction to Strategic Urban Projects (1979-2004)”, *Planning Perspectives* 18, no. 4 (2003): 399-421. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0266543032000117514>.
- 3 Manuel de Solá-Morales, “La Segunda Historia del Proyecto Urbano. Otra tradición moderna”, *UR* 5 (1987): 21-27.
- 4 José María Ezquiaga, “Entre el plan y el proyecto. Las transformaciones del Madrid de los ochenta”, *A&V Monografías de Arquitectura y Vivienda* 30 (1991): 4-5.
- 5 Willem Salet and Enrico Gualini, *Framing Strategic Urban Projects. Learning from current experiences in European urban regions* (Oxfordshire and New York: Routledge, 2007).
- 6 José Miguel Fernández-Güell, *Planificación estratégica de ciudades* (Madrid: Reverté, 1997).
- 7 Marisa Carmona, *Globalización y grandes proyectos urbanos: la respuesta para 25 ciudades* (Buenos Aires: Infinito, 2005).
- 8 Alan Altshuler and David Luberoff, *Mega-projects, The Changing Politics of Urban Public Investment* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003).
- 9 Frank Moulart, Arantxa Rodríguez and Erik Swyngedouw, “Large-scale urban development projects, urban dynamics and social polarization”, in *The globalised city*, ed. Frank Moulart, Arantxa Rodríguez and Erik Swyngedouw (Oxford: University Press, 2003), 47-64.
- 10 Sofia Pagliarin, Anna M. Hersperger and Benoît Rihoux, “Implementation pathways of large-scale urban development projects (IsUDPs) in Western Europe: a qualitative comparative analysis (QCA)”, *European Planning Studies* 28, no. 6 (October 2019): 1242-1263. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2019.1681942>.



Figure 1. Some strategic urban projects: Euralille, Hafen City (Hamburg) and La Confluence (Lyon).

processes of 'urban rehabilitation', 'urban renewal' and 'urban remodelling', as well as the 'redevelopment' and 'urban remodelling' of urban areas".¹¹ In the case of industrial land we would be referring, according to Moya, more to a reconversion.

The article discusses the SUPs by analysing the factors of their development, their objectives, characteristics, strategies and processes. Subsequently, it evaluates the results of these projects; it carries out a critical review, based on the evaluations received in the academic sphere, as well as their efficiency and current validity, in a context of changing urban paradigms, to conclude by drawing conclusions that can be used for current and future urban challenges.

City branding; morphological approach; city of the fragment and strategic urbanism

The development of these major projects was due to several factors. On the one hand, the imposition of neo-liberalism on both sides of the Atlantic from 1979 onwards. On the other hand, globalisation led to the relocation of less specialised industrial activities. This was accompanied by the emergence of urban marketing or *city branding*,¹² which increased competitiveness between cities in order to generate new economic activities, mainly in the tertiary sector, by attracting talent and employment. This current promoted the search for an iconic image, the creation of a brand, improving global positioning and increasing private investment, at a time when the business conception of the city took precedence over previous paradigms, which were more concerned with the social improvement of citizens. The predecessors of the SUPs in Europe can be considered to be Mitterrand's *Grand Travaux* in Paris and the urban regeneration of the London Docklands in London, with the creation of the Canary Wharf financial district.

In the theoretical-disciplinary context, the critique of the modern movement, already initiated in the 1950s and 1960s in Italy by Rogers¹³ and continued in France during the 1970s and 1980s¹⁴ involved, among other issues, a revival of the morphological approach in the analysis of the city; the rejection of zoning as a tool for urban

11 Luis Moya and Ainhoa Díez de Pablo, "La intervención en la ciudad construida: acepciones terminológicas", *URBAN NS04* (Sep 2012 - Feb 2013): 113-122.

12 Michalis Karavatzis (2004) "From city marketing to city branding: Towards a theoretical framework for developing city brands", *Place Branding* 1, no. 1 (2004): 58-73. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.pb.5990005>.

13 Ernesto Nathan Rogers, "Continuità", *Casabella-continuità* 199 (1953): 3.

14 Bernard Huet, "Editorial Recherche Habitat", *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* 174 (July-August 1974): VII.

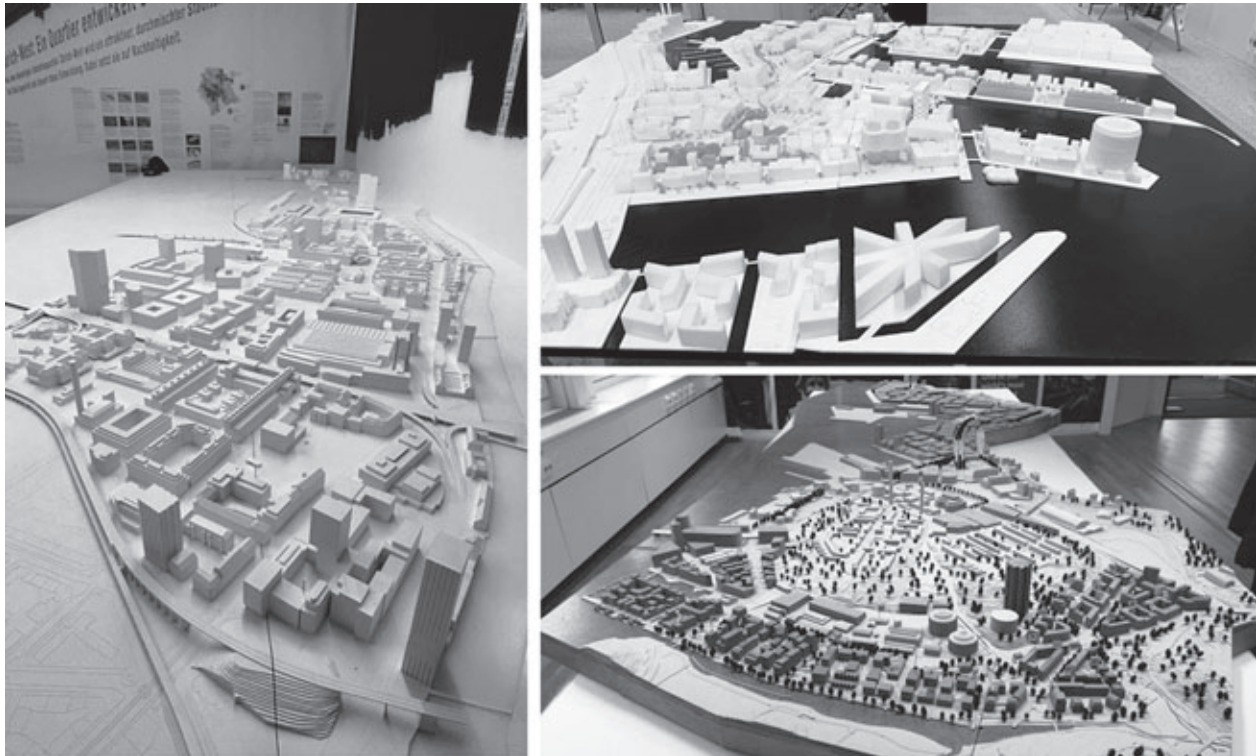


Figure 2. Some strategic urban projects: Zurich West, Nordhavn (Copenhagen) and Royal Seaport (Stockholm).

planning; the recovery of historical heritage and an emphasis on the priority of urban regeneration of central and peri-central areas, as opposed to the expansion and growth of the peripheries produced in previous decades. It coincides with the perception of the city as a discontinuous, fragmented element and, therefore, the belief that the city's problems cannot be solved in their totality, nor with unitary conceptions, but only through partial actions. According to Secchi,¹⁵ the fragment is what characterises the contemporary city. For Leira¹⁶ urban planning had to be more strategic and selective, prioritising future goals and transforming this capacity into very clear and selected objectives, due to the scarcity of resources, not only economic but also in terms of mobilisation and organisation capacity. It was necessary to physically organise the future of large cities into a limited set of integrated actions that would allow efforts to be concentrated on specific points, as strategic lines for the evolution of the city.

Another determining factor for the development of these projects was the rigidity of planning and its legal system. The urban project was not institutionalised, resulting in a more flexible, action-oriented instrument that allowed for variations in the programme and spatial definition, making it a more efficient and practical way to act in specific areas of the city. By advancing faster than the plan, especially in the case of the mega-event, on many occasions its development was independent of the plan, operating as an element outside it, as happened in Seville with the 1992 Expo.¹⁷ On other occasions, they operated contrary to the established general plan, imposing themselves on it and urging its subsequent modification.

External image; investment attraction; job creation; economic development and increased global competitiveness

Despite the differences between the different actions, in terms of the local social and productive context, the objectives of the SUPs are similar. These objectives consist mainly of improving the external image of the city in order to attract and increase tourism;¹⁸ attracting foreign investment; creating qualified employment;

15 Bernardo Secchi, "Città moderna, città contemporanea e loro futuri", in *I futuri della città. Tesi a confronto*, ed. Giuseppe Dematteis, et. al. (Milán: Franco Angeli, 1999), 41-70.

16 Eduardo Leira, "Los planes generales en las grandes ciudades: problemática actual", in *Seminario sobre la revisión del Plan General de Ordenación Urbana, 2 and 3 November 1992*. Zaragoza City Council, 1993.

17 José Seguí, "La transición del planeamiento en Andalucía: análisis de la década de los 80", in *La cultura arquitectónica en los años de la Transición*, ed. Carlos Sambricio (Sevilla: Editorial de la Universidad de Sevilla, 2023), 331-346.

18 Stephen Essex and Brian Chalkley (1998): "Olympic Games - catalyst of urban change", *Leisure Studies* 17, no. 3 (1998): 187-206. <https://doi.org/10.1080/026143698375123>.

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seeking economic development and improving the global positioning of the city. For Salet and Gualini, the objectives of SUPs lie in connecting the regional service economy to international economic networks, with the aim of increasing regional competitiveness; in condensing cultural, social and economic flows of activity through high-level multinodal networks; in balancing new urban patterns through the development of mixed land uses at selected nodes and environmental qualities and in shaping the physical conditions for balanced spatial patterns, resulting in a new diversified use value of urban space rather than the resulting values of purely commercial space. In short, the search for a new area of centrality on a regional scale, with a multiplicity of activities resulting from its mix of uses and the generation of a quality urban environment through the design of public space.

New CBDs; mega-events, flagship projects and digital districts

We can establish four main strategies used for its development. In the first phase, between the 1980s and the 1990s, the strategy consisted of continuing the productive tradition of the land, using the area as a business district, along the lines of the American CBDs. These were mixed-use areas with a high percentage of tertiary uses and office towers as their main architectural element. They sought to attract foreign investment, increase employment in the tertiary sector and thus improve the quality of life in the city and boost economic development. Examples from this period include Kop van Zuid in Rotterdam, Potsdamer Platz in Berlin and Euralille.

During the 1990s, another of the strategies employed was the celebration of major events as *leverage* or catalysts, with the aim of promoting a whole series of actions that were considered a priority for the city. By major events we mean the Olympic Games and International Exhibitions, which were intended to finance, through state funds, most of the actions for urban regeneration. At the same time, global media attention was sought and, in addition, the improvement of the city's international image. The paradigmatic example of this strategy was the urban transformation of Barcelona during the Olympic Games. The areas of new centrality¹⁹ defined in that period marked the strategic nature of the actions carried out in the city. In fact, among the 12 areas of centrality detected were the four in which the facilities for the 1992 Olympic Games were to be developed. Also through this strategy, Lisbon developed the urban regeneration of the industrial area to the east of the city with the celebration of the 1998 Expo, giving rise to the area of the Parque das Nações, the new Oriente railway station and the Jardim do Paseio dos Heróis do Mar Park. Although it was a peripheral area, it sought to create a new area of centrality.

A third strategy employed has been the construction of *flagship projects*. Bianchini²⁰ refers to them as a significant, prestigious or *high-profile* area that catalyses urban regeneration. Vila Vázquez²¹ considers them, in a more specific way, as cultural facilities of a monumental nature, of public initiative. *Flagship projects*, whether they are large cultural facilities or office towers, become the symbol of urban transformation and of the change in the city's productive model. In Spain, the most paradigmatic case was the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, inaugurated in 1997, as a symbol of the change of the city's productive model to the tertiary sector and of a whole series of urban regeneration actions, with the central area of Abandoibarra as the main focus.

These three strategies have been used in most European strategic projects since the 1990s, either as one of them or in combination. Holding the big event has not been a very widespread strategy, mainly due to the difficulty and limited possibilities of holding it. Examples of this strategy include the Turin Olympic Games in 2006, which were used to renovate, among other things, the Lingotto area, and the London

19 Joan Busquets, *Barcelona. La construcción urbanística de una ciudad compacta* (Barcelona: Ediciones del Serbal, 2004).

20 Franco Bianchini, Jon Dawson and Richard Evans, "Flagship Projects in Urban Regeneration", in *Property-led Urban Regeneration*, ed. Patsy Healy et al. (London, E & Fn Spon, 1992), 245-255.

21 José Ignacio Vila Vázquez, "Les flagship projects et leur impact territorial dans les villes européennes: analyse comparative de quatre cas à Paris, Santiago de Compostela, Porto et Oslo" (Phd diss., Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne et Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 2016).

Figure 3. New cityscapes, skylines and flagship projects: Kop van Zuid (Rotterdam), La Confluence (Lyon), Parque das Nacões (Lisbon) and the Elbphilharmonie (Hamburg).



Figure 4. Strategic projects in Zaragoza: Expo 2008 and Milla Digital.



Olympics in 2012, with the regeneration of the Stratford area and the River Lea. In the case of international exhibitions, Malmoe, with the 2001 European Housing Exhibition in the city's port and Zaragoza, with Expo 2008, with the recovery of the banks of the Ebro. The success of the Guggenheim in Bilbao led many cities to seek the same impact with the construction of a large cultural facility. In Europe we have the cases of the Oslo Opera House; the Musée des Confluences, in Lyon; the MUCEM in Marseilles; the Museum am de Stroom, in Antwerp or the Elbphilharmonie, in Hamburg. Holding International Exhibitions as an instrument for urban renewal of city areas was a strategy already used in the 19th century.²² In the 20th century we have several examples, such as the Festival of Britain in 1951, for the regeneration of London's South Bank. In the case of cultural *flagship projects*, we have a clear previous example in the Sydney Opera House, designed in the 1950s and inaugurated in 1973. What differentiates these actions from the more recent ones is fundamentally the greater complexity and scale of the latter's actions, as well as their more far-reaching objectives, both local and global.

The most recent strategy consisted of a specialisation of business districts in ICT and the creation of technology districts or digital districts.²³ This strategy sought to develop the knowledge society in the city by introducing new tertiary uses to attract technology companies and jobs for the creative class.²⁴ According to Florida, this class, which comprises jobs related to the creative process, such as design, the arts and media, and includes jobs in the technology, education, research, engineering or health care sectors, is the main force for economic growth in cities. Digital districts are born out of the attempt to attract such activities in cities that are not nodal points of the knowledge economy. They are mostly configured in areas with a productive, usually industrial, past and, being located in central positions, they are conceived as mixed-use urban developments, as opposed to the CBDs or the mono-functional science parks of previous decades. They aim to be an area integrated with the rest of the city, functioning 24/7, where public space is considered key to achieving an attractive environment. European examples of this strategy include, with mixed results, the 22@ district in Barcelona; Arabianranta in Helsinki; Media City UK, in Manchester, or Milla Digital in Zaragoza.

22 Javier Monclús, *Exposiciones internacionales y urbanismo. The Expo Zaragoza 2008 project* (Barcelona: Edicions UPC, 2006).

23 Andrés Fernández-Ges, "The Rise of Mixed-Use Urban Developments and Digital Districts", in *Urban Visions*, ed. Carmen Díez and Javier Monclús (New York: Springer, 2018), 217-226. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-59047-9_21.

24 Richard Florida, *The rise of the creative class* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

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	City	Project	Area	Mega-event	Flagship project	Main uses
1980-90	London	Docklands Canary Wharf	River port Industrial area			Secondary CBD
	Rotterdam	Kop van Zuid	River port City centre		De Rotterdam Hybrid building	Mixed Use - CBD
1985-95	Berlin	Potsdamer Platz	Productive area City centre		Forum, Kollhoff and Bahn Towers	Mixed Use - CBD Cultural Centre
	Barcelona	Olympic Village	Waterfront Railway land	Olympic Games	Hotel Arts Tower Mapfre Tower	Mixed Use Commercial
	Lille	Euraille	Railway land City centre		Tour de Lille	Mixed Use - CBD Shopping centre
1990-00	Lisbon	Parque das Nações	River front	International exhibition	Portugal Pavilion	Mixed Use Cultural
	Bilbao	Abandoibarra Ría 2000	River port City centre		Guggenheim Museum	Mixed Use Cultural - offices
	Helsinki	Arabiannranta	Waterfront Industrial area			Mixed Use Digital district
1995-05	Malmö	Västra Hammen Bo01	Seaport City centre	Housing Fair	Turning Torso	Mixed use Residential
	Antwerp	Eilandje	Seaport City centre		Museum am de Stroom	Mixed use Residential - cultural
	Hamburg	Hafen City	River port City centre		Elbphilharmonie	Mixed use Residential - cultural
2000-08	Barcelona	22@	Industrial area			Mixed use Digital district
	Zurich	Zurich West	Industrial area		Prime Tower	Mixed use Residential - offices
	Oslo	Fjord City Bjorvika	Waterfront City centre		National Opera	Mixed use Residential - cultural
	Lyon	La Confluence	River port City centre		Musée des Confluences	Mixed use Residential - cultural
	Dublin	Dublin Docklands	Seaport City centre			Mixed use - CBD Residential- cultural
	Turin	Lingotto	Industrial area	Olympic Games		Mixed use Residential
	Zaragoza	Expo Zone 2008 Digital Mile	River front Railway floors	International exhibition	Bridge pavilion	Mixed use Equipped park
	Marseilles	Euroméditerranée	Seaport City centre		MUCEM	Mixed use - CBD Residential - cultural
	Manchester	Media City UK	River port Industrial area			Mixed use Digital district
2008-	Milan	Porta Nuova	Railway floors City centre		UniCredit tower Bosco verticale	Mixed use- CBD Commercial
	London	Stratford Olympic village	Industrial area	Olympic Games		Mixed use Equipped park
	Helsinki	West Harbour	Seaport City centre			Mixed use Residential
	Copenhagen	Nordhavn	Seaport			Mixed use Residential
	Stockholm	Royal Seaport	Seaport			Mixed use Residential

Figure 5. Strategies, periods and main uses in European strategic urban projects.

Public initiative, political leadership, public-private partnership, top-down process and urban project method

Although the SUPs address the local specificity of each case, their contexts are different, and it is difficult to draw parallels, as in the case of objectives and strategies, the characteristics and processes they share are comparable.



Figure 6. Location of some SUPs in Western Europe.

These projects are always of public initiative, due to their strategic nature for local competitiveness, the priority need for their reconversion, their scale, complexity, and the fact that the land is publicly owned or, if not, the administration acquires them (Hafen City). The lead role usually lies with the local administration, although, depending on the scope, regional and national administrations are involved in the process. In both cases, the mayor's leadership during development is vital. Examples of this leadership include mayors such as Pascual Maragall in Barcelona, Pierre Mauroy in Lille, Raymond Barre in Lyon, Henning Voscherau in Hamburg and Juan Alberto Belloch in Zaragoza. In some cases, as in Kop van Zuid, the initial impulse is given by a municipal society or foundation, in this case the Architectuur Instituut of Rotterdam.²⁵ Another essential figure is the *amenageur*, a manager of large projects, who exercises the technical leadership of the process, carrying out the tasks of mediation and dialogue between the parties involved. In France, he was a figure independent of owners, investors and planners, such as Jean Paul Baïetto in Euralille. In Spain it had more political weight, such as Oriol Bohigas in Barcelona or Ibón Areso in Bilbao. In Zurich West this figure was exercised by the city's director of urban planning, Franz Eberhard. In the most recent projects, this function will usually be carried out by a public or mixed company created for this purpose. The aim of these companies, in addition to managing the design process and the works, is to make a profit by selling land to private developers to cover part of the cost. In some cases, a separate municipal department is also created for permits and licences, which allows for greater flexibility in the bureaucracy of the process.

25 Nathanaelle Baës-Cantillon et al., *Changing cultures of planning* (Brussels: Architecture Workroom, 2012).

Public-private partnerships are essential. The complexity and scale of these projects means that all stakeholders need to be involved as early as possible in the process. Avoiding the participation of real estate agents has usually resulted

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in the planning of non-viable products, hindering the development of the area. An example of this is the case of Milla Digital in Zaragoza. Not having the opinion of citizens and neighbours often leads to unrest, protests and a lack of identity with the project. The process must combine technically or politically sensitive actions and requires the coordinated involvement of a large number of public and private actors and stakeholders over a long period of time.²⁶ As for the extent of public involvement in the processes, it varies from project to project. In the Baltic cities, local governance has the main control throughout the process (Orestad, Nordhavn, Royal Seaport or West Harbour). The same is true in Switzerland (Zurich West). In France, the process is initially initiated and led by the local administration under the coordination of the *aménageur* (Euralille) and then developed through the creation of a public-private company (Euralille and La Confluence). In Spain and Germany, public companies are created for their development (Milla Digital and Hafén City). In the UK and Italy (Canary Wharf, Porta Nuova), the public agency initiates the process and defines the strategic development, but delegates the entire design and implementation process, selling the land to private companies.

The methodology of the process has usually been top-down, from the leadership position of the local government. Public participation has not been the norm in the process, with exceptions such as in Kop van Zuid and Zurich West, with a broad and extensive period of analysis, reflection and participation of the various stakeholders in the shaping of the project. They are developed through urban projects as a means of design. Their relationship with planning is ambivalent. In some cases they operate under its determinations, although they rarely assume them, since the vision, the conditions of the programme and the requirements of the design prevail over the regulation imposed by the plan, which is modified, even on several occasions, as the urban project develops. In the Zuidas Plan, this issue has been taken on board in the process, with a planning review occurring approximately every two years²⁷ which has recently allowed the inclusion of residential uses in the previously mono-functional business district, as the need for them has been identified for the improvement of the area.

Evaluation of SUPs according to academic critics

Strategic urban projects have been highly favoured by local politicians, who believed that they were an effective instrument for achieving the desired objectives. However, this confidence has not been equally shared in academia. Bianchini²⁰, referring to *flagship projects*, points out that they were adopted as urban regeneration policy because local governments saw them as the only method of attracting resources from both the public and private sectors. Doucet²⁸ points out that the image represented and sold by *flagships* does not usually correspond to the reality that residents have of the city, which is why they generate division and confrontation; that they are actions fundamentally oriented towards the entertainment and amusement of the masses, producing greater inequality and polarisation, both socio-economic and spatial, as they are carried out and have influence only in a specific area of the city. Smith²⁹ points out that most of them reproduce actions that have already been successful, by imitation, which can lead to a certain weariness, reaching a certain “architectural fatigue”, so that the effects of the new iconic monuments lose their potential.

Although some argue that the benefits of these projects also reach the lower social classes, such as Loftman and Nevin,³⁰ others consider that these projects are not being conceived for the local population or those close to the *flagship*, but rather oriented towards the middle and upper classes, tourists and outside investors, being the latter who really benefit.³¹ They are also have been criticised for the diversion of municipal budgets, which could have been

26 Paul Lecroart and Jean Pierre Palisse, “Large-scale urban development projects in Europe: what lessons can be learnt for the Île de France Region?”, *Les Cahiers de l’Institut d’aménagement et d’urbanisme de la région d’Île de France* 146 (2007).

27 Stan J.H. Majoor, “Coping with ambiguity. An urban megaproject ethnography”, *Progress in Planning* 120 (2018): 1-28. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.progress.2016.07.001>.

28 Brian Doucet, “Flagship regeneration: panacea or urban problem?”, Paper presented to EURA Conference, The Vital City, Glasgow, 2007.

29 Andrew Smith, “Conceptualising city image change: the ‘re-imagining’ of Barcelona”, *Tourism Geographies* 7, no. 4 (2005): 398-423. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14616680500291188>.

allocated to the provision of basic services. According to Harvey,³² as they are place-specific projects that concentrate the focus of public and political activity, they divert attention from more necessary problems in the region or territory. Another recurrent criticism by several authors, such as Capel³³ and Moix,³⁴ is the large amount of resources they consume, being more necessary in other areas of local policy, stating that they are fundamentally an instrument of real estate speculation and personal political promotion; that they generate low social cohesion; that they do not achieve a territorial impact, or that they are environmentally unsustainable. According to Pie and Tejada,³⁵ the interest of the authorities lies more in a real estate operation to finance part of the infrastructure investments than in an urban renewal operation with social objectives. Moulart et. al.³⁶ warn about the priority of private economic interests, the lack of social orientation, their high environmental cost and their poor integration into broader urban processes and planning systems. For Carmona, the economic growth that some cities have experienced with these projects has been at the expense of the majority of the population, who remain oblivious to the success and benefits of these processes. However, one of the few studies on residents' perceptions of the *flagships*, in the Kop van Zuid, resulted in a more favourable opinion and assessment than expected, especially in the poorer areas, probably due to the improvements in the quality of the environment brought about by the urban regeneration project.³⁷

Lights and shadows of the SUPs

Despite all these criticisms and the uneven results according to the different projects, we can affirm that, although at different levels, these projects have had a great impact on the cities. They have served to transform the city on a global level, serve as a reference for the urban regeneration of the area, modify the productive model, increase tourism, generate a new icon for the image of the city and change its perception. The case of Bilbao is paradigmatic. The Guggenheim Museum, whose inauguration was 25 years ago, has been the symbol of the urban transformation and change of the city's productive model.³⁸ But it has not been the only case. In its time, so was Barcelona, and it has happened in cities such as Lille, Rotterdam, Lyon and Oslo, among others. In Hamburg, despite the great public unrest and opposition to the construction of the Elbphilharmonie, both because of the delay in its construction and its high cost overrun, only a year after its inauguration, in 2017, tickets for concerts were sold out, tourism in the city had increased significantly and the construction of several high-end hotels was planned, with a total of 532 new rooms.³⁹ Five years later, the building had received more than 15 million visitors and hotel overnight stays in the city had increased by 15%.⁴⁰ In most cases, the SUPs have generated new public spaces in central and peri-central areas of high urban quality, such as the Parque das Nações and the Jardim do Passeio dos Heróis do Mar in Lisbon, the banks of the Saône in Lyon, the Campa de los Ingleses in Bilbao, the Metropolitan Water Park in Zaragoza, or the Biblioteca degli Alberi park in Milan. These spaces, although located in a specific area, have been conceived and, for the most part, are used and enjoyed by a large part of the citizens, improving the relationship of the inhabitants with their environment.

It is true that the costs of these actions have been high, significantly increasing the planned investment. In mega-events, the pressure of having a fixed deadline for execution generates an acceleration that can have repercussions on the quality of the works and contributes to cost overruns or failure to complete all the planned actions, which are unlikely to be carried out after the event. The repetition and imitation of the *flagship project* model has also meant, as Smith points out, that

30 Patrick Loftman and Brendan Nevin, "Prestige Projects and Urban Regeneration in the 1980s and 1990s: a review of benefits and limitations", *Planning Practice & Research* 10 (1995): 3-4, 299-316. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02697459509696280>.

31 Patsy Healey, Simin Davoudi and Solmaz Tavsanoglu, "Rebuilding the City", in *Rebuilding the City: property-led urban regeneration*, London: E. & F. N. Spon, 1992.

32 David Harvey, "From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: the transformation in urban governance in late capitalism", *Geografiska Annaler*. 71, no. 1 (1989): 3-17. <https://doi.org/10.2307/490503>.

33 Horacio Capel, *El modelo Barcelona: un examen crítico*, 2nd ed. (Barcelona: Ediciones del Serbal, 2009).

34 Llatzer Moix, *Arquitectura milagrosa* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2010).

35 Ricard Pie and Carlos Tejada, "El TAV como excusa", *Geometría* 27-28 (2000): 2-20.

36 Frank Moulart, Erik Swingedouw and Arantxa Rodríguez, "Social polarization in metropolitan areas", *European Urban and Regional Studies* 8, no. 2 (2001): 99-102. <https://doi.org/10.1177/096977640100800201>.

37 Brian Doucet, "Resident perceptions of flagship waterfront regeneration: The case of the Kop van Zuid in Rotterdam", *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 102, no. 2 (2010): 125-145. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9663.2010.00611.x>.

38 Sam Jones, "Guggenheim effect: how the museum helped transform Bilbao", *The Guardian*, October 31, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/31/guggenheim-effect-how-the-museum-helped-transform-bilbao>.

39 Hamburg Tourismus, Hamburg's tourism statistics. <https://www.hamburg-tourism.de/business-medien/marktforschung/tourismusstatistiken/>.

40 Luis Gago, "La sala Elbphilharmonie presenta un primer lustro triunfal", *El País*, section Cultura, January 14, 2022, <https://elpais.com/cultura/2022-01-14/la-sala-de-conciertos-elbphilharmonie-celebra-un-primer-lustro-triunfal.html>.



Figure 7. New parks and public spaces in Lisbon, Zaragoza, Lyon, Hamburg, Copenhagen and Milan.

recent projects have not had the same media impact as previous projects. The MUCEM in Marseilles, the Musée des Confluences in Lyon or the Museum am de Stroom in Antwerp have not had the same repercussion nor are they as internationally known as the Guggenheim in Bilbao. Nor have more recent exhibitions, such as the Zaragoza Expo 2008, received the global attention they once did. Nor are there many studies that confirm the effects and improvements they produce at a regional or metropolitan level. Finally, the commodification of culture and the thematisation of the city that they tend to produce are also debatable.

Crisis and recovery of an instrument modified by current paradigms

The economic and real estate crisis, as well as increased environmental awareness, made this instrument fall into disuse, at least for the same purposes. The new developments that are taking place in the regeneration of large-scale port areas, mainly in Northern Europe, such as Royal Seaport in Stockholm, West Harbour in Helsinki and Nordhavn in Copenhagen, are building new mixed-use districts with a high percentage of residential use, without *flagships*, equipped with the necessary local amenities for their inhabitants and the public spaces necessary for a high quality of life for their inhabitants. The most recent SUPs are projects more focused on being sustainable and solving the need for local housing than on generating architectural icons or improving in the global ranking. Even future projects, such as the reconversion of the port of Tallinn, designed by Zaha Hadid, or the future Olympic Village in Milan in the Porta Romana area, for the 2026 winter games, do not contemplate the construction of flagship projects, but focus on the sustainability of the project, on landscaping and on the design of a network of quality public spaces.

The SUPs have achieved many of their intended effects, either through one strategy or another: transforming and restoring a run-down central area; generating a change in the city's image; and increasing tourism. Also, once implemented, they have improved the perception of the city's citizens. Of all their achievements, it is worth highlighting that they help to solve the need for housing and the creation of new quality public spaces, integrated into the city, with a careful urban design. As stated by Díez and Monclús,⁴¹ the philosophy of integrating architecture and urban planning has historically been an important principle for the achievement of high quality urban planning. On the other hand, the SUPs have not been as successful in generating synergies for the development of large parts of the city and the territory. In this sense, they cannot be considered as suitable instruments for a metropolitan strategy or for solving the problems of a region, even though they cover a large area and have a high urban potential. Neither do they seem

41 Javier Monclús and Carmen Díez, "From Urbanism to Planning to Urban Project. The Pursuit of 'Urbanity' in Spanish Plans and Projects", *International Planning History Society Proceedings, TU Delft* 17 (2016): 23-35.

to have produced greater social cohesion or equity, nor do they seem to have addressed issues of environmental sustainability, although these were not their a priori objectives, as they were implemented at a local level, but with a global perspective, without attempting to address local needs with the same intensity. This situation is being reversed in the most recent projects, which have not helped the relationship or improvement of general planning, but rather their needs, both in terms of programme and design, have been imposed on the considerations of the plan, taking into account its condition of opportunity. This relationship has improved in the latest SUPs initiated in the Baltic cities, where the transformation of the port areas has not depended so much on the event or flagship project, but on the need for housing and the recovery of a central area of the city, which have been considered within a more global city strategy, with long-term growth.

Although the strategic projects have been an effective instrument, insofar as they have achieved the objectives pursued in a high percentage, one might question whether these objectives were appropriate or necessary for the city. Another question that should be addressed is the efficiency of these actions, as the amount of resources used to achieve their goals has been excessive in many cases, which has gradually led to a necessary change in their strategies and objectives, more in line with the current economic, social and urban planning situation. The real estate and financial crisis of 2008 led to a crisis in the model. Cities then opted for urban planning focused on solving urban problems through short-term, low-cost, one-off actions to resolve specific issues in the city. However, these actions lack a broader vision that allows action at the city level. Increasingly, it is being assumed that solutions to complex problems depend on the ability to combine these short-term actions with longer-term, strategic actions.

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