

URBAN REGENERATION: THE ROLE OF URBAN PLANNING IN THE REVITALISATION OF RUN-DOWN NEIGHBOURHOODS

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Urban planning is often understood as a series of instruments aimed at ordering and transforming land use. New neighbourhoods are conceived and articulated through urban plans, which are conditioned by the characteristics established in these plans: what the land will be used for and how it will be used, what the building typology will be, or what shape and surface area the open spaces and public facilities will have, among others.

One of the best known development planning instruments at neighbourhood level is the Programa de Actuación Urbanística, commonly known as PAU. PAUs, which implement the planning and urbanisation of land classified as unplanned development land, have the capacity to develop completely new neighbourhoods in cities. Some examples are Las Tablas, Sanchinarro and Valdebebas, all three in the city of [Madrid](#), planned in the 1990s and characterised by huge peripheral plots of land with closed blocks, few commercial premises, endless avenues for motorised traffic, excessive roundabouts and a lack of public facilities.



Figure 1. Location of the PAUs in the city of Madrid
Source: Journal of the Madrid City Council (2023)

This development model, based on the growth of the city and the maximum occupation of developable land, was not sustainable in its day, but today it is even less so. On the one hand, **neighbourhoods are being created where social relations are privatised**: there are no public facilities, and the closed housing model favours day-to-day life behind closed doors. On the other hand, there is a **commitment to expansion and massive housing construction**, forgetting that land is not infinite, and that **there are many consolidated neighbourhoods at risk of degradation** and in a situation of vulnerability that require intervention.

An example of these neighbourhoods are those built in the 1960s throughout Spain to house Spanish working class migrant families who moved to the big cities to work. These neighbourhoods are characterised by **open block constructions** with low residential areas, density and the absence of facilities, shops and green areas. At the same time, due to the speculative activity and urban planning indiscipline of the time, the **building quality and accessibility** of the dwellings were poorly developed, resulting in dwellings without lifts, with little surface area and severe energy

efficiency problems.



Figure 2. Construction of the Las Viudas neighbourhood (Valladolid) in the 1960s.
Source: Valladolid Municipal Archives

Moreover, in most cases, the socio-demographic characteristics of these neighbourhoods reveal **vulnerable social situations**. On the one hand, poor building quality and the creation of new, more attractive neighbourhoods lead to a drop in housing prices, attracting low-income populations at risk of social exclusion. On the other hand, the age of the neighbourhoods results in high percentages of an ageing population, whose housing does not meet their living needs due to its physical inaccessibility.

Some examples of these neighbourhoods are [Las Margaritas](#) in Getafe, [La Mina](#) in Sant Adrià de Besós, [Zaramaga](#) in Vitoria-Gasteiz, Las Viudas in Valladolid and [Las Tres Mil Viviendas](#) in Seville.



Figure 3. Neighbourhood of Las Margaritas, Getafe
Own elaboration

In this sense, **planning instruments have the potential not only to create new spaces, but also to modify those already existing** and in need of reforms and improvements for the benefit of their inhabitants. Therefore, the role that urban planning can play in this type of neighbourhood is very relevant.

An example of this is the **Special Interior Reform Plan (PERI)**, which has the capacity to reconfigure and rehabilitate existing spaces and buildings through the creation of public facilities and improved circulation, among others.

Thus, a neighbourhood such as those mentioned above could benefit from the public actions of a PERI, with special emphasis on the **transformation of public space and facilities**, through the creation of new facilities for social interaction, the modification of roads in order to reduce motorised traffic and favour active mobility modes, and the transformation of unused public spaces into functional and habitable spaces.

In short, urban development plans such as PERIs, aimed at the rehabilitation of consolidated land, can be a great **tool for urban regeneration**, together with actions at building and housing level that seek to improve physical accessibility and energy efficiency¹, and public policies that guarantee the social welfare of those in vulnerable situations.

In the current economic, social and environmental situation, **regenerating rather than building** is crucial for the sustainability of our cities.

(1) For example, the [*Programmed Residential Rehabilitation Programmes \(ERRP\)*](#).

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Main image: Edurne Astaburuaga (own elaboration)

