

Review of the Thesis

Edwin Javier Azofeifa Valverde, Physical-spatial and social configuration at neighbourhood level: Raval (Barcelona), a preliminary consideration according to the compact city model (Department of World History, Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague, 2014, 173 pp. incl. appendixes)

The presented thesis explores the highly relevant issue of contemporary urban development. The thesis draws inspiration from the field of urban (community) planning, and builds upon key assumptions of one particular approach developed within the field – the concept of Compact City coined by American scholars in 1970s and adopted by some municipal authorities in Europe over the last decade as a guiding principle of urban planning policy. As the author makes clear in the introduction, he shares the belief of proponents of the Compact City concept that city planning activities should prioritize needs of the community and that the community of residents should participate in the development of comprehensive planning, which should aim at formation of sustainable and functional city. In Azofeifa's perspective, integrative approach of Compact City model is well equipped to preserve (or re-establish) spatial and social integrity of cities, recently challenged by growing social and economic inequalities.

The thesis focuses on a single case study of the neighborhood of Raval, located in the vicinity of historical center of the city of Barcelona. The choice of the case study is well justified by the character of the neighborhood, characterized by several interconnected structural deficits: 1) a high level of immigrant population of various origin; 2) relative lack of development (compared to other parts of the city); 3) uneven distribution of public, shopping and commercial facilities, which give the neighborhood a peripheral character and contributes to its internal fragmentation.

Azofeifa demonstrates familiarity with all relevant authorities and major academic debates in the field. He develops a clear and rigid methodology, which serves his general purpose (although some reservation could be expressed – see below). Application of GIS tools to measure uneven distribution of chosen characteristics within the neighborhood allows him to assess the level of spatial fragmentation and to identify major deficiencies of Raval as seen from the perspective of the Compact City model. The thesis is clearly structured and written in good English.

All of this said, I have four questions that I would like Mr. Azofeifa to address:

- 1) One important objection concerns the lack of contextualization of the chosen case study. Azofeifa focuses on an analysis of the current state of Raval, without considering larger spatial frames such as the city of Barcelona as such – one could argue that the decision to take existing administrative unit of Raval as a unit of analysis obscures important processes transgressing its administrative borders - what if the inner north/south differentiation reflects broader re-configuration of the city?
- 2) Another issue reflects methodological problem, often found in this kind of descriptive analysis, generally referred to as *confirmation bias*: chosen theoretical and

methodological assumptions frame the analysis in a way that enable only confirmative findings. Azofeifa, applying the Compact City perspective, starts with an assumption that Raval is a fragmented community, and his methodology based on such assumption unavoidably leads to confirmative conclusions. The question then is to what extent Raval could be seen as fragmented when compared with other parts of the city of Barcelona? What levels of spatial differentiation Azofeifa sees as “negative” and why?

- 3) My third point concerns the selection and justification of analyzed categories. If an existence of certain level of fragmentation is once established, what is the purpose of analyzing spatial distribution of so many other characteristics? Is it not redundant, for instance, to analyze spatial distribution of water fountains, parking meters etc.?
- 4) This leads to a more direct questioning of the chosen methodology. Given the lack of long term perspective in the thesis, the reasons of inner fragmentation of Raval and its past development remain obscured. Simultaneously, concentration on quantitative data makes it impossible for the author to identify implications of such differentiation for daily lives of citizens of Raval. This seems to be a major drawback – is it not one of the principal requirements of the compact city approach to integrate experiences of local population in assessment and development of urban planning policies? If questionnaire was not an option, as he explains, what about local initiatives, news, blogs etc.?

Despite such methodological imperfections, the thesis fully satisfies relevant requirements and I recommend it for defense with a preliminary mark B.

Jíra Janáč Prague 20/6/2014