

Tutor's report of M.A. 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)

Javier Azofeifa Valverde decided to focus his research on one of the pressing problems of contemporary, globalized world, problem that has in the last decades attracted the attention of social scientists of various fields of study – the theme of European city and its many problems occasioned by the current economic and social processes (among them, de-industrialization or international migration, residential segregation and fragmentation etc.). Concretely, he focused on the neighborhood of Raval in Barcelona, former industrial quarter located in the district of Ciutat Vella, the historic city center of Barcelona. Starting from the conceptual framework of the “compact city model”, that is, the strategies for urban planning that aim to surpass the dispersion, “urban sprawl” (physical as well as mental) that characterizes the present day cities, the author aimed at identifying the principal structural weaknesses of the residential area under consideration. Even though Raval might at first sight seem relatively “compact” (even overpopulated) location, there is unbalanced distribution of clusters of population, services and of what the author denominates “urban furniture” (i.e. those elements in the urban spaces which „make daily life safer and more comfortable and to which all residents have equal access“, p. 15)

To fulfill this goal, the student applied a wide array of methods and had drawn upon varied sources, starting from the secondary literature and official sources produced by the municipal authorities, to the detailed physical survey of the neighbourhood with the use of the GIS mapping system; and, finally, adding few sample interviews. These, however, are of more illustrative character. As the author explained, there has been “significant distrust shown by Raval residents towards questionnaires and the gathering of information“ (p. 63). Therefore, the interpretation of spatial distribution of urban facilities seemed as an appropriate way to analyze the functioning of the neighbourhood independently of the willingness of its inhabitants to cooperate in the research.

The theme of the thesis is thus not only legitimate; but very actual. Indubitable is enormous amount of work, time and effort invested to the thesis from part of the student. Still, there are some serious problems that manifest themselves in the thesis.

1. The work lacks integration into broader spatial and chronological context. And as it focuses exclusively on the problem of Raval (with the exception of very brief historical outline in the first part of the text), the reader is deprived of the chance to understand which problems of this neighbourhood are specific and which mimic the problems of other European metropolises. Also, the specific characteristics of the historical period in which the studied processes are taking place – the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with its new economic and social pressures, rapidly changing social values and hastily developing modes of communication – should have been paid more attention. Even given the fact that the text is rather extensive (for the standards of M.A. thesis), broadening of the context parts at the expense of the particularized description of the neighbourhood would make the analysis more plausible as well as useful.

2. The presented work focuses on the city, not on its inhabitants. In other words, it lacks almost completely a cultural dimension. This is legitimate, of course; but given the anthropologic-historical orientation of the TEMA program and the contents of the assigned readings, it is rather regrettable that the author did not pay more attention to the way the

inhabitants of the neighbourhood view and interiorize the settings in which they live, try to interpret these cultural understandings from the material world he was mapping.

3. And with this is related the third and most important problems. In fact the author is not interested in reasons for the specific spatial organization of Raval. His approach was rather in the direction of social-engineering. The principal question – “how the unequal integration of the population in spatial, social and economic terms poses significant challenges to compact urban development“ (p. 17) – is rather descriptive. But after describing the urban configurations, he measured it against the model of the compact city and evaluated it as „wrong“, without paying any attention to the cultural specifics of the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, their needs and preferences.

As for the formal standards, the thesis is written in good English, with some minor grammatical and syntactic errors. The author has given precise bibliographical references; the text is well arranged, the pictorial annexes well chosen. Indubitable is also the fact that the author is familiar with the theoretical and methodological works in the restricted field of city planning (while, however, in concordance with my second objection specified above, it would be beneficial to include in his ample bibliography also some more general works on society and culture).

The thesis certainly brings forward great amount of factual information that could be used by other students or academics interested in the problem. Great part of the work done, however, resulted in vain due to the too-narrow focus of the author and his preoccupation with the compact city model, without admitting other options in the solution of the pressing problems of contemporary urban society or in fact even aiming at understanding these problems beyond the area of spatial distribution of the “urban furniture”.

Javier Azofeifa Valverde produced a sound work based on the original research and meeting all the formal standards. Therefore, I recommend it for the defense. With the view of the errors, not factual, but rather with respect to the general approach to the topic and conceptual framework pursued by the author, examined in detail above, I propose to evaluate this thesis as „Very Good“ (4 in Hungarian, 2 in Czech grading system, B in TEMA grading). However, the definitive grading would certainly depend on the ability of the author to explain his objectives and methods during the defense and to answer the questions of the evaluators.

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