

# RESISTING AGAINST SPECULATIVE URBAN REGENERATION IN THE SHRINKING CITY OF FERROL

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## Abstract

The phenomenon of urban shrinkage constitutes an increasingly relevant challenge on the European level entailing dramatic socioeconomic and urban transformations and certainly altering urban policy-making standards. Recent debates suggest that urban shrinkage may enable alternative urban agendas and practices to take actual form. Against this backdrop, the article aims to analyse the role of shrinkage as regards local community empowerment through the empirical examination of a neighbourhood contestation movement against a failed urban redevelopment project in the old-industrial medium-sized city of Ferrol. To this end, the study mobilises semi-structured interviews and documentary research as principal data collection instruments. The paper argues that the overall vacuum of institutional power that holds sway over the city for the last four decades may act as a lever to upscale local grassroots movements' strength in urban decision-making leading to effective modifications in mainstream growth-oriented neoliberal urban agendas. It contends that the organisation of resistance through the generation of strong collective alliances and a thorough use of each political momentum stem as crucial aspects to empower the grassroots forces on the common goal of dissuading speculative urban development purposes, giving rise instead to more progressive urban actions, agendas and decision-making models.

**Keywords:** shrinking city; urban regeneration; social housing; collective alliances; vacuum of power

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Urban shrinkage is inherent to contemporary globalisation processes, determining the future evolution of territories, societies and the activities therein (Baron et al. 2010). Shrinking cities refer to those "urban areas that have experienced population loss, economic downturn, employment decline and social problems as symptoms of a structural crisis" (Martínez-Fernández et al. 2012: 214). Shrinking cities reveal deteriorating socio-economic conditions, rising social distress and inequalities, languishing public resources, and a dissatisfactory city image prompting disinvestments (Fol 2012). Hence, they usually

manifest a stereotyped image of economic and sociocultural wasteland (Oswalt 2005), displaying a sharply fading attractiveness in contrast with growing metropolitan spaces (Cauchi-Duval et al. 2016).

After nearly two centuries of undisturbed population growth concentrated in cities, the world is now meeting a deceleration in the speed that growth happens (Lima & Eischeid 2017). The 2017 UN world population prospects review contends that population growth is meeting an uneven spatial evolution, reflecting a future demographic stagnation and even shrinkage in many western countries. Anyway, rather than a prospect scenario, urban shrinkage is already a common trend across Europe (Haase et al. 2013), showing strong signs of further reinforcement in the near future (Rieniets 2009). The global changes that supervene the definitive collapse of the fordist socioeconomic model have progressively increased the scientific, social and political attention devoted to urban shrinkage (Haase et al. 2016).

Small and medium-sized cities are particularly prone to undergo processes of urban shrinkage (Martínez-Fernández et al. 2016). Shrinkage is thus compromising the central role of equilibrium played by these cities as regards territorial structuring and socio-spatial development, undermining essential public service provision (Pirisi & Trócsányi 2014). Yet, these spaces have hitherto drawn very scarce scientific and socio-political attention exposing signs of marginalisation from the globalised policy programs, public debate and sociocultural imaginaries (Lang 2012; Wolff et al. 2013). Bringing together economic recession, population loss and political dependency in a context dependent relational way (Lang et al. 2015), some authors start to point out shrinking cities as subject to peripheralisation processes (Weck & Beißwenger 2013), contrary to central metropolitan spaces that concentrate, public and private discourses, resources, wealth and capital (Di Méo 2010; Laménie 2016).

In addition to the socio-spatial unevenness engendered by the ongoing neoliberal globalisation (Smith 2002), that defines the peripheralisation of shrinking cities, traditional studies have rather related their emergence and reproduction to relevant internal factors including deindustrialisation, suburbanisation and socio-political transformations amongst others (Stryjakiewicz 2013). The phenomenon of urban shrinkage responds thus to multidimensional processes and effects with demographic, social, economic and physical implications, which depend on both exogenous and endogenous elements that interplay differently in spatial terms (Prada-Trigo 2014). In the light of the foregoing, shrinking cities have to deal with raising challenges such as for instance outmigration, aging population and brain-drain, oversupply of urban amenities and infrastructures, retail and housing vacancy and depreciation, social distress and impoverishment, diminution of public budgets and financial resources etc. (Hollander et al. 2009). The effects of urban shrinkage are therefore especially remarkable at the local scale where the regular city functioning is put in jeopardy, pushing authorities to take varied action (Olsen 2013).

Taking advantage of the opportunities granted by an extreme case (Flyvbjerg 2006) such as the shrinking city of Ferrol, the first purpose hereof, is to analyse the urban strategies adopted in the city to cope with the effects of urban shrinkage. Secondly, the article aims at exploring the connection between shrinkage and the emergence of alternative urban strategies and practices. Finally yet importantly, it seeks to assess the relevance and impact of grassroots' self-empowerment through direct resistance and urban engagement as regards the generation of alternative urban practices and decision-making models. Taking a critical stand, the paper aspires to overcome the shortcomings posed by the hitherto dominant descriptive studies focused on the explanation of the origins and the effects of urban shrinkage, and urban policies set up to deal with it (Großmann et al. 2013). Additionally, it aims at shedding more light on the examination of the so far neglected shrinking small and medium-sized cities.

In view of the above objectives, the paper questions first, to what extent does urban shrinkage facilitate or hamper the rise of progressive alternatives to mainstream growth-oriented urban practices (Hollander & Németh 2011). Along with it, it wonders about the power of grassroots' direct involvement in the quest for alternative urban policy-making opposed to exclusionary urban regeneration endeavours (Karaman 2014).

To this end, the article makes extensive use of semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in combination with an in-depth documentary research as its main data collection methods, drawing on the provided interpretive advantages to come out with substantial theme analyses (Blanchet & Gotman 2007). The analytical procedure does first examine the produced notes to identify the key discourse excerpts enabling the coding exercise that precedes theme construction and the final relational meaning-making interpretation of the outcomes (Cope & Kurtz 2016). This scheme stems as notably useful when the balanced combination between different data generation sources such as interviews and documents is envisioned (Bowen 2009).

First, the study displays a brief literature review focused on the governance of urban shrinkage and the potential emergence of alternative urban horizons and practices, taking a closer look at the role played by the engagement of an active citizenship. The article explores afterwards the creation of Recimil social housing district on a growth context nurtured by the buoyancy of the military function and the shipbuilding industry that have determined the urban evolution of Ferrol. Then, the causes leading to the shrinkage of the city since the late 1970s are analysed in a relational way together with their principal effects. Next, the struggle over Recimil social housing district is presented deepening into the strategies adopted by neighbours together with academia and other grassroots movements to confront the various urban regeneration projects presaging the displacement of neighbours and the disappearance of the social housing district. Finally, the paper recaps the main findings around the struggle over this urban

space with respect to the governance of shrinkage, mainstream urban regeneration, and the influence of grassroots collective alliances in the promotion of more progressive urban policies.

## 2. REVIEW ON THE GOVERNANCE OF SHRINKAGE AND THE RAISE OF ALTERNATIVE URBAN INITIATIVES

Through the assimilation of growth as the only desirable horizon, city authorities, stakeholders and residents have traditionally tended to conceive urban shrinkage as a digression against the natural order of things (Bontje 2004; Popper & Popper 2017). Initial denials of the lasting reality of shrinkage gave rise thereafter to strenuous efforts focused on the creation of strategies targeting to reverse shrinkage and enable new growth stages to see the light (Bucek & Bleha 2013). City authorities do commonly underline the attraction of external capital and investment as cornerstones to secure competitiveness and funnel re-growth (North & Nurse 2014). In such event, governance tends to undertake an entrepreneurial turn deploying mainstream urban practices to seduce the private realm. These initiatives comprise city marketing strategies and great urban regeneration projects (Hospers & Reverda 2015), increasingly questioned as regards their effectiveness in reaching the envisioned growth (Béal et al. 2010).

Due to the extreme fragility of growth paradigms to answer the immediate socioeconomic urgencies linked to the reality of shrinkage (Ortiz-Moya 2015), an increasing amount of shrinking cities has started to accept and embrace their current reality (Oswalt 2005; Olsen, 2013). Numerous actors begin therefore to conceive shrinkage as a lasting process demanding the abandonment of growth-oriented theories and practices for the adoption of alternative approaches (Béal et al. 2016). Many of these innovative right-sizing strategies have also driven to the reproduction of further socio-spatial unevenness through episodes of capital accumulation and dispossession at the expenses of the most deprived ones (Rhodes & Russo 2013; Hackworth 2015). Other citizens-led local direct actions may instead actually represent an alternative to the mainstream growth-oriented models (Hackworth 2014), rejecting traditional growth priorities to seek for social equilibrium instead (Schindler 2016). In any case, these novel perspectives are always variable in time, contingent upon local institutional, policy, and planning arrangements and frameworks, dependent on evolving interests, and profoundly heterogeneous as regards their actual embodiment (Béal et al. 2017).

Either way, the materialization of any alternative urban horizon requires local inhabitant's direct involvement in the transformation of the most deprived spaces and neighbourhoods, committing thus to actively challenge the existing situations of socio-spatial injustice (Rousseau & Béal 2015). According to

Morckel and Terzano's (2018) examination of Flint, inhabitants of shrinking cities may show high levels of distrust on local authorities and officials, fuelling social agitation and movement. Along with the abundance of vacant urban spaces, the weakness of public institutions and the social wariness towards the local political realm may actually turn shrinking cities into informally decentralized spaces where neighbour-led "do it yourself" (DIY) practices have the potential to creatively defy growth-oriented norms and discourses (Galster 2017). In any case, local social capital built upon socio-institutional trust and citizens' active participation and empowerment stems as a pillar for the achievement of more socially sustainable urban futures (Ročak et al. 2016).

In view of the foregoing, shrinking cities are now home to variegated alternative urban practices in the development of which neighbours play a central role. For instance, one may identify the proliferation of land banks in shrinking cities as an instrument to facilitate public space conversion (Németh & Hollander 2016). These land-use repurposing experiences include urban greening and agriculture initiatives aiming at improving local sociocultural and ecological sustainability and thus upgrading remaining residents' quality of life (Pallagst et al. 2017). Other alternatives comprise the implementation of local cooperative economic systems bringing communities together in the development of shared productive endeavours where everyone benefits from mutual solidarity that results in increasing household incomes and social cohesion (Li et al. 2016; Zingale et al. 2017).

Nevertheless, right-sizing strategies may also serve to reconfigure austerity-based re-growth priorities facilitating dispossession through the implicit acceptance of mainstream urban redevelopment processes that counter the explained socially oriented purposes (Peck 2012). The structuring of new planning regulations and zoning codes stems as a powerful instrument when defining urban development guidelines in shrinking cities (Aalbers 2014). In this regard, urban redevelopment programs do often affect affordability culminating in episodes of gentrification, although it is avoidable (Tighe & Ganning 2016). Urban regeneration strategies may thus contribute to the displacement of the most vulnerable social groups unable to keep up with the increasing market rates (Rousseau 2009). Through the exhaustive study of the five quickest shrinking cities in the US, Silverman et al. (2016) reveal how different right-sizing urban revitalization strategies ranging from the deployment of collaborative experiences and temporary land-uses to those focused on the attraction of the "creative class" may ultimately drive to growing inequalities targeting exposed communities.

Yet, the realities of powerlessness and inequality may act as a political wake-up call for the dispossessed ones evolving into collective responses against the capital accumulation goals masked behind the gentrification-led urban renewal programs that spring up in marginalized spaces throughout



the globe (Dikeç 2017). The consciousness about these displacements threats do often turn into direct struggles over space, which qualified as urban common, inflames communities' fight for the re-appropriation of their neighbourhoods (Safransky 2016). Spatial struggles in shrinking areas may give birth to diverse community-led urban regeneration initiatives taking diverse forms such as community land trusts that focus on housing rehabilitation whilst preventing demolition and further speculation (Thompson 2015).

### 3. CONTEXTUALISING RECIMIL NEIGHBOURHOOD AMIDST THE GROWTH AND SHRINKAGE OF FERROL

Ferrol is an “ex-novo” city, founded at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century for military reasons on a geographically enclosed area, adjacent to a previously existent fishing village and rapidly becoming the most relevant Spanish military location of the Atlantic side (Clemente-Cubillas 1984). The city's military vocation came along with a strong shipbuilding industry initially ancillary to it. Accordingly, the city has always been characterised by a marked socio-political division between a progressive working-class embodied by shipyard workers and a conservative elite attributable to the army (Cardesín 2004). Moreover, the socio-political division would result in a clear spatial division of social classes within the city (Cardesín 2000). The contrast between the military and bourgeois city centre (A Magdalena) and the working-class estuary-side neighbourhood (Esteiro) do perfectly symbolise this socio-spatial segregation (Clemente-Cubillas 1984) (Map 1). Against this conflictive and unstable background, and taking into account its historical dependence on national decision-making and funding, the city has been subject to cyclical periods of affluence and decay contingent upon the changing political and economic conditions (Precedo 1995).



MAP 1 - CONTEXTUALISATION OF CITY NEIGHBOURHOODS

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The city's greatest demographic and urban expansion would match with the Francoist dictatorship period when Spain underwent unprecedented rates of urban growth (Nilsson 2011). A committed national policy identifying urban spaces as catalysts for development through the spatial fixation of industrial and economic activities would designate Ferrol among the urban areas meant to receive a massive influx of capital, investment and population (Cardesín 2016; Cardesín 2003)<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, Ferrol strengthened its double specialisation around the shipbuilding sector and the military activity, becoming an important hub receiving a great inflow of migrants but affected by a severe housing shortage. In this regard, forced by a new Francoist national law, municipalities were obliged to supply land for urban development in order to provide affordable housing and accommodate the recently arrived population in cooperation with the just created national housing agency (Cardesín 2016).

Due to the city's exponential economic and demographic growth and the severe housing shortage, Francoist authorities ordered the construction of a new social housing district at the edge of the city centre, lying next to one of the city's main entrances. Although first conceived in the 1920s, Recimil social housing district was finally built-up during the 1940s (Map 1) in accordance with the *Casas Baratas* social housing precepts aiming at accommodating a quickly growing deprived working-class population (Cardesín 2004). The neighbourhood was raised following the urban planning tenets of the time, taking into account urban hygiene and the provision of efficient urban infrastructures as crucial aspects (Ibarra 2016). The district was thus conceived as an autonomous entity with its own public facilities comprising commercial premises, a public market, a school, and a church among others, in order to provide basic services to its residents (Soraluece & Fernández 2001).

Since the 1970s, globalisation of production, finance, trade and distribution, technology, and knowledge and information (Amin 1994; Castells 2000), caused a deep restructuring of the productive activity. Drawing on the infinite investment opportunities, activities relocated according to simple profitability criteria, (Feagin 1998). All the entailed socioeconomic changes weakened western economies, bringing about the dismantling of former fordist welfare systems and their gradual replacement by variegated forms of neoliberal capitalism (Brenner et al. 2010). The intensification of capital and investment fluxes spurred therefore the global ascendancy of a competitive-driven economy, enabling free-market logics and its advocates to overpower anterior democratic institutions in decision-making (Holton 2011). The political and economic naturalisation and the uneven spatial dissemination of the neoliberal market

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<sup>1</sup> The fact that Franco was born and raised in Ferrol would provide a definite impetus to the city. The operation of local and regional elites to secure his presence in the territory through the public acquisition and further donation of a manor house to the dictator played a crucial role.

logics (Rossi 2017) would imply the emergence of mounting socio-spatial disparities throughout the world (Scott & Storper 2003). Socio-spatial inequalities took shape through the proliferation of shrinking cities as politically and economically peripheralised spaces subject to sociocultural and media stigmatisation (Roth 2016).

Coinciding with this period of global socio-spatial reconfigurations, Spain was exposed to the emergence of incisive socio-political transformations showing incipient attempts of uprising against a fading Francoist dictatorship that would influence the transition after Franco's death in 1975 (Labrador 2014). Against this turbulent framework of global spatial restructuring and national socio-political transformation of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the city began a period of durable urban shrinkage (Precedo 1995). Ferrol fits therefore into the common shrinkage trend experienced by multiple highly specialised old-industrial medium-sized cities in Spain (Sánchez-Moral et al., 2013). As it was the case in many other cities of the Spanish Atlantic façade (Doignon et al. 2016), Ferrol also started to notice the adverse effects of a quickly aging population that compromised generational replacement, displaying a great population drop (Armas-Quintá et al. 2012).

The double military and shipbuilding specialisation that did once permitted the city to grow beyond its former limits, would also become responsible for its later crisis and further urban shrinkage. Contingent upon the state's tutelage and unable to efficiently adapt to the new globalised context, the shipbuilding sector was dramatically hit by the continuous industrial rationalisation processes that preceded and accompanied the incorporation of Spain in the European Economic Community (Pascual & Benito 2017). In this regard, the recurrent EU political interferences and the lack of a strong internal commitment have compromised the competitiveness of the shipbuilding sector in the long-term (Preto-Fernández 2017). The gradual demise of the industrial activity and the subsequent suppression of jobs met by the main shipbuilding specialised cities in Spain were therefore due to key global and local political decisions that engendered an unstoppable process of demographic loss, economic decline, social agitation and urban deterioration (Pascual & Benito 2017).

As previously stated, the shrinkage and peripheralisation process experienced by Ferrol since the 1980s is not exclusively related to the shipbuilding sector, but also attributable to the decay of its military activity. Hereof, the Spanish integration into NATO would bring with it significant consequences concerning the city's former military role (Cardesín 2003). Ferrol did no longer hold a crucial military function, leading to an important reduction of the sector that would diminish even more with the end of the compulsory military service in Spain (Cardesín 2000). As suggested by Laménie (2016), once the restructuring of the activity leads to sharp personnel reduction processes, those places characterised by a strong military sector are likely to undergo the loss of many ancillary employments too.



#### 4. THE DISTRICT IN THE SPOTLIGHT OF THE GROWTH-ORIENTED URBAN DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY:

The dramatic magnitude of shrinkage in terms of political and socioeconomic crisis provoked an almost immediate reaction from the co-responsible nascent democratic national political actors from the 1980s onwards. The answer did mainly consist in launching successive unfruitful reindustrialisation and diversification programs aiming at restructuring the local economic tissue in order to facilitate new growth stages (Espinosa de los Monteros & Boceta-Álvarez 2005). Nevertheless, Ferrol would exhibit an absence of the obliged endogenous dynamism required to accompany these external impulses, highlighting a lack of coherent local responsiveness (Pascual & Benito 2017), in a national context of neoliberalisation<sup>2</sup> that came together with an inconsistent expansion of the welfare state since the late 1970s (Ferrera 2005).

The deployment of welfare in Spain was built upon an extremely fragile development model that took advantage of the highly speculative land and real estate bubbles to create a general perception of socioeconomic prosperity whereas carrying out massive dispossession practices (López & Rodríguez 2011). The subsequent financial engineering and land deregulation reforms approved in Spain laid the legal foundations for speculative growth to occur (Vives & Rullan 2014). This enabled private investors, land developers and real estate agencies to take complete control over urban development with the precious complicity of local authorities and the banking system, which provided unredeemable loans to modest households (Janoschka & Hidalgo 2014).

Taking into account the above, the main local policy efforts at the time revolved around the redevelopment of the urban space, conceiving construction and real estate as an alternative to the fading military and industrial sectors (Armas-Quintá et al. 2012). The national neoliberal switch that relied on the financierisation of urban space as a mechanism of development (Vives & Rullan 2014) and the homeownership culture linked to the urban policy reforms already started during the Francoist dictatorship (Cardesín 2016), gave rise to a series of speculative urban policies in Ferrol. Accordingly, following a global trend (Sager 2011) Ferrol conceived its urban space as a cornerstone for market-economy and consumption initiatives to flourish and facilitate re-growth.

In consideration of the foregoing, Ferrol tried to replicate the development strategies adopted by other former industrial shrinking cities, fostering land reclassification of industrial brownfields to host new

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<sup>2</sup> Some authors consider the National Plan for Economic Stabilization launched by the Francoist government in 1959 as an incipient sign of neoliberalisation in Spain (Brennetot 2013). The plan consisted in the adoption of budget redressing measures, currency convertibility, pricing freedom, reduction in custom duties and the openness to international investment.

urban development projects, aimed at producing a switch from an industrial productive economy towards a real estate based one (Cardesín 2000). As early as 1974 city authorities ordered the demolition of Esteiro, the oldest working-class district in the city to endeavour its further redevelopment (Cardesín 2003). The project entailed the eviction of the former residents who were displaced to the unfinished peripheral working-class district of Caranza (Map 1). Urban regeneration became therefore a vehicle for accumulation by dispossession, securing social cleansing of deprived groups from central locations (Harvey 2008).

The progressive devolution of social housing property and powers to local authorities that took place in Spain since the 1980s would play a transcendental role in the evolution of Recimil too. In this regard, the district has usually called scarce attention of the corresponding local authorities in charge, whose carelessness has driven Recimil to its gradual deterioration (Díaz-Leira 2017). Drawing on this justification, vivid efforts to evict tenants and bulldoze the neighbourhood were fostered by successive local governments from the 1980s onwards. These redevelopment goals coincide in time with the period of land deregulation policies and the intense escalation of speculative urbanism as a fundamental economic driver of the Spanish growth stage (Lois-González et al. 2016).

TABLE 1: SYNTHESIS OF THE REDEVELOPMENT THREATS CONCERNING RECIMIL

Date	Episodes	Main Actors
1987	-Pro-demolition political claims -Press articles dealing with demolition	-Local right wing government -Regional media
1992	-Pro-demolition political claims -Press articles dealing with demolition	-Local left wing government -Regional media
1997	-Pro-demolition political claims -Press articles dealing with demolition -Initial redevelopment drafts	-Local right wing government -Regional media -Regional right wing government -Architecture and planning firm
2003	-Election platform entailing demolition -Media consultation on demolition -Technical report backing demolition -Diffusion of a redevelopment project	-Local right wing government -Regional media -Regional right wing government -Architecture and planning firm -Real estate developers

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Hereof, putting forward traditional arguments such as the detrimental state of the whole district, the high costs of an eventual rehabilitation and the great potential value of the area (Lees & Ferreri 2015) subsequent efforts of evictions and demolitions took place in Recimil under consecutive right wing and left wing local governments. The first endeavour fostered by a right wing local government in 1987 was continued with a second one in 1992 under the rule of a left wing coalition government. Nevertheless, the most determined attempts were unveiled in 1997 and more intensely in 2003 (Table 1). On each occasion, right wing local governments were behind the urban regeneration projects, working hand in

hand with a architecture and planning company that would secure its participation in the subsequent redevelopment stage. The first attempts were immediately responded by intense neighbourhood protests that benefited from the support of the corresponding opposition parties to reach prompt temporary victories. In both cases, the fight against bulldozing purposes was led by “El Pilar” neighbourhood association. A few meetings held between the association’s representatives and local councillors were thus enough to provisionally jettison demolition aims.

Nevertheless, the association “El Pilar” did not react to the rumours of a third eviction and demolition essay disseminated in 1997 by the newly elected right wing local government. Instead, the representatives of the association asked neighbours to await further information before taking a stand. Anyway, the increasing news about an imminent project of urban intervention concerning the district drove a group of 228 tenants to collectively organise and create a new neighbourhood association called “San Fernando de Recimil” in 1997. In any case, regardless the differing standpoints, tenants have always demonstrated a critical view as regards demolition and redevelopment projects refusing to accept their implementation (Díaz-Leira 2017).

## 5. INSIGHTS OF THE CONFLICT AND THE GRASSROOTS RESISTANCE

As reported overseas (Hackworth 2005; Kuyucu & Ünsal 2010), the struggle to prevent the destruction of the public housing district was first initiated by a leading group of tenants and directly concerned actors. This casual associative reaction received thereupon the support of diverse activist movements, and various groups sensitive about public housing and architectural heritage conservation. The initial spontaneous demonstrations were strengthened by the emergence of additional alternative actions and proposals. The new association defined its *raison d’être* around the achievement of three major objectives. It sought first to inhibit the demolition and posterior urban predation of the social housing district, calling authorities instead for the comprehensive rehabilitation of the neighbourhood. Secondly, it aimed at ensuring the legalisation of irregular tenants, whose renting contracts were no longer valid. Finally, the association claimed the access to ownership as a right of the tenants according to the original contracts.

*Extract 1: Member of San Fernando Association (Nov. 2017)*

“We felt the need to react against the news announcing the imminent approval of a redevelopment project for Recimil once we checked that El Pilar association refused to take a stand before the publication of any firm decision... Our absolute priority was to prevent the neighbourhood from being demolished in order to host a speculative redevelopment project, calling for its comprehensive urban rehabilitation instead.”

Contrary to other examples of social housing district renovation where heritage conservation was built-upon a certain consensus between public authorities, heritage institutions, conservation groups, and tenants (Pendlebury et al. 2009), Recimil has always exhibited confronted views concerning its future. In this regard, the urban regeneration prospects led by successive city authorities and their affiliates have firmly clashed against the organised resistance of tenants and the multiple groups and individuals allied to them.

*Extract 2: Real estate agent (Dec. 2016)*

“Recimil was a missed opportunity to answer an increasing good-quality housing demand in the inner city area. We understand that some neighbours may lack of resources to afford an updated value and that is why a combination between free-market housing and social housing development in the area would satisfy everyone. Unluckily some people did not understand these needs impeding the urban regeneration of Recimil”

Working hand in hand with various active stakeholders, the association succeeded in consolidating an alternative anti-speculative project, availing themselves of the corresponding opposition parties to strengthen their negotiation force and influence local decision-making. Despite the absence of a stable urban governance framework, the association thrived to harness political momentum as a lever to propel a solid pro-rehabilitation campaign.

The initial actions focused on handing out informative leaflets and missives throughout the city, were later accompanied by the collection of citywide signatures supporting tenants' claims and the celebration of pro-rehabilitation demonstrations in Recimil. The classic forms of protest channelled the upscaling of the fight in defence of the social housing district, leading neighbours' to define more concrete strategies to confront urban redevelopment purposes (Robinson 1995). In this regard, the support of professionals and knowledge actors (scholars, architects, urbanists, lawyers, etc.) was fundamental to move forward from simple protests towards the organisation of alternative views for the neighbourhood. In addition to them, the association also sought political backup, looking for the adhesion of opposition parties as it happened in the first two attempts. Drawing on the lack of political stability of Ferrol where city government is subject to constant changes after every municipal election, neighbours tried to build and exploit momentum to empower themselves (August 2016). Hereof, the establishment of further links and collective alliances happened to be crucial to pave the way for the proposal of an alternative future for the district (Soja 2010).

*Extract 3: Journalist in local newspaper (Dec. 2016)*

“Recimil is a politically neglected and socially stigmatised neighbourhood ... Neighbours still carry on a relentless fight for its rehabilitation, rising up against the situation of urban blight ... Together with different allied movements, neighbours also raised their voices against the ensuing demolition projects that once threatened Recimil”

Once collectively organised, the envisioned actions would focus on the elaboration of diverse legal and technical reports highlighting the great historical, urban and social value of the district to demand its exhaustive rehabilitation instead of the anticipated demolition. Following the example of other spaces confronting similar urban development challenges, litigation became a privileged means to vehicle grassroots’ claims (Hackworth 2005). In this regard, the movement set up a double-faced strategy. On the one hand, tenants drew on appeals claiming their right to property in order to gain time and impede immediate demolition through the extension of the corresponding legal processes. On the other hand, they tried to secure the listing of the district under historic and cultural heritage protection to prevent its demolition in the long term.

TABLE 2 - SYNTHESIS OF OWNERSHIP AND REGULARISATION REQUESTS

Date	Episode	Shaping and outcomes
1987	-1st full ownership right claim	-Direct informal petition in public hearings -Tenants’ request channelled by opposition -Discussed in relevant city commission -Refused by the majority in power
1993	-2nd full ownership right claim	-Direct informal petition in public hearings -Tenants’ request channelled by opposition -Discussed in relevant city commission -Refused by the majority in power
2000	-3rd full ownership right claim	-Direct informal petition in public hearings -Initially accepted by the government -Discussed in municipal plenary session -Rejected by most city councillors
2004	-4th full ownership right claim	-Direct informal petition in public hearings -Official legal request by a group of tenants -Discussed in municipal plenary session -Rejected by all city councillors in unison -Further appealed and rejected
2013	-Global neighbourhood census	-Updating of a partial census of 2010 -Approved by the city government -Executed by local police
2015	-New neighbourhood census	-New revision of the 2013 census -Approved by the city government -Elaborated by the relevant city services -Completed in 2017 -Unstated regularisation of illegal tenants

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The association and its allies mobilised full access to ownership as strategy in 1987, 1993 and 2000, closely after each of the subsequent eviction and demolition attempts. Anyway, the most considerable essay to demand tenants' right to ownership took place in 2004 when 55 of the remaining former tenants asked to the city council for their recognition as full-right owners arguing that the original rental agreements comprised amortisation as a means for access to ownership (Table 2). Even if tenants did really believe on their demand, the main underlying goal when submitting the formal request to the city council to get official property titles was to divert attention away from demolition, awaiting for new favourable changes in local government to bring back rehabilitation atop the local urban agenda.

The latest ownership request submitted by former tenants to the municipal administration in 2004 was unanimously rejected by the city council, arguing that renting was privileged over property in the former contract agreements and the further reviews. Nonetheless, this strategy contributed to redress political debate, shifting it away from demolition and redevelopment questions. In doing so, tenants succeed in reorienting the formal neighbourhood policy agenda. Thenceforth, in addition to the structured opposition to the urban regeneration project, partisans of redevelopment would had to deal with neighbours' claims of ownership rights. Thus, making use of political and legal appeals tenants gained time to prevent immediate urban interventions, lengthening the process in the quest for the consecution of new majorities in following elections.

The approval of the first city plan in 1984 enabled the listing of the district as a unique heritage to preserve, recommending its entire rehabilitation. Additionally, in 1991 regional authorities conferred a major protection level to the neighbourhood, including it into the regional historic and cultural heritage protection list. Nevertheless, these protection labels were seriously compromised during the latest urban regeneration attempt of 2003, when local authorities and private developers strived to remove Recimil from the regional heritage protection list in order to erase any legal hurdle to its bulldozing and posterior redevelopment (Table 3). Anyway, the vivid contribution of diverse experts involved in the fight, drove the association to produce exhaustive reports claiming the area's historic and cultural value as worth preserving. The elaboration and dissemination of legal and technical accounts served therefore as a defensive tactic to impede the execution of the two latest demolition attempts. In 2005, the College of Architects of Galicia devoted a cycle of conferences to the district to commemorate the World Architecture Day. The various presentations underlined the distinguished urban, architectural, cultural and social values incarnated within the district, portraying Recimil as the greatest urban hint of Ferrol in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Knowledge actors did thus come together arguing for the comprehensive rehabilitation of the district while rejecting the redevelopment goals borne by local authorities.

Championed by the local authorities advocating for regeneration, the suppression of the district from the regional list of protected heritage sites became central to the fight over urban space. Recimil's removal from that list would facilitate local authorities to order evictions and ease the demolition of the neighbourhood. The multiple protests carried out by the association and its allies were enough to delay any decision about the site's protection level between 1997 and 1999. Thereafter, the election of a new local government in 1999 enabled the grassroots movement to influence further policy decisions affecting Recimil. First neighbours pushed local government to ask regional authorities for the end of the administrative process leading to the removal of the district from the regional heritage protection list. Besides, when reviewing the general city plan in 2000, local government pledged to keep the district included into the local heritage protection list. Unlike the 1984 city plan in force, the 2000 review committed to preserving the nature of the neighbourhood through the achievement of its comprehensive rehabilitation. Accordingly, city authorities ordered the production of a preliminary technical report meant to define the rehabilitation project (Díaz-Leira 2017).

TABLE 3 - SYNTHESIS OF THE HERITAGE PROTECTION LISTING PROCESS

Date	Episodes	Main actors
1984	-Approval of the 1st city plan -Legal protection of the neighbourhood	-Local left wing government
1991	-Inclusion of the neighbourhood within the regional heritage protection list	-Local left wing government -Conservationist groups -Historic and cultural heritage department
2000	-Approval of the 2nd city plan -Commitment to rehabilitating Recimil	-Local left wing government -San Fernando Association
2005	-Recimil erased from the regional list	-Local right wing government -Regional right wing government -El Pilar association -Architecture and planning firm -Media
2005	-Cycle of conferences on Recimil	-Regional order of architects -Conservationist groups -Urban scholars -San Fernando Association
2006	-Recimil back in the regional list	-Regional left wing government -Historic and cultural heritage department -Conservationist groups -Urban scholars -San Fernando Association

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Nevertheless, the victory of a new right wing local government in 2003 would bring back the debate around the district's urban regeneration, giving rise to the most intense attempt to bulldoze and redevelop the neighbourhood. On this occasion, the same architecture and planning studio associated

to the pro-regeneration government in previous stages was appointed to conduct a report concerning the situation and future prospects of the district. The report concluded that demolition and redevelopment should be conceived as the best option. In line with it, the new city council removed Recimil from the local heritage protection list and formally asked regional authorities to take the same decision concerning the regional list. Local authorities and its affiliates nurturing the growth machine (Robinson 1995; Wilson & Wouters 2003), did finally reach their objective in 2005. The risk of an imminent demolition was therefore closer than ever before. One more time, all the actors contrary to the redevelopment project set out a series of legal actions against the measure in order to delay the process at court. The accession of a left wing coalition to regional power in 2005 steamed as vital to impede the removal of the district from the list and disrupt its redevelopment. Drawing again on political momentum and the knitted collaborative tissue, neighbours could fold the district back into the regional historic and cultural heritage protection list in 2006 (Table 3).

TABLE 4 - SYNTHESIS OF THE REHABILITATION PROJECTS

Date	Episodes	Main actors
2001	-Rehabilitation project draft -Unimplemented due to power shift	-Local left wing government -Regional housing department -San Fernando Association -Conservationist groups
2006	-Rehabilitation project draft -Undrawn due to lack of local support	-Regional housing department -San Fernando Association -Conservationist groups
2008	-Definite approval of rehabilitation -Partial completion in 2010	-Local left wing government -Regional housing department -San Fernando Association -Conservationist groups -Urban scholars
2009	-Appeals against the project's execution -Acceptance of few modifications	-Local opposition councillors (Independents and Conservatives)
2016	-Formal declaration of Recimil as an Area for Comprehensive Rehabilitation	-Regional right wing government -Local left wing government -Historic and cultural heritage department -San Fernando Association -Conservationist groups -Urban scholars
2017	-Beginning of public works	-Local left wing government

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The definitive inclusion of Recimil into the local and regional heritage protection lists along with the review of the city plan of 2000 would pave the way for the partial achievement of neighbours' major objective. Namely, the rehabilitation of the social housing district. The implementation of the first serious rehabilitation projects approved in 2001 and 2006 was cancelled due to two separate appeals for annulment fostered by those favourable to demolition and regeneration. Finally, despite new appeals

presented by the advocates of redevelopment in 2009, the definitive rehabilitation of the district was definitively unblocked in 2008, when the co-existence of left wing governments in both local and regional power gave the go-ahead to the required public works. In spite of its limited impact (only few façades, eaves, water connection, gutters and drainpipes were comprised), the first rehabilitation of the district was accomplished in 2010<sup>3</sup>. Finally, following a formal request of the city council, the relevant department of the regional authority declared the district as a comprehensive rehabilitation area (*Área de Rehabilitación Integral*) at the end of 2016. This label unlocks the access to meaningful national and regional funding opportunities to carry out the comprehensive rehabilitation of the neighbourhood. The city council has already established a specific rehabilitation bureau in order to manage the whole process, initiating the ongoing public works by the end of 2017 (Table 4).

As identified in Heygate London (Lees & Ferreri 2015), the rejection of both speculative urban redevelopment goals and tenants' outmost expectations (full access to ownership) has led to the consideration of the district as a public good, raising awareness about the importance of keeping a city-run social housing district. In this regard, the running local government elected in 2015 approved a still unfinished regularisation process to legalise the status of those tenants living in an irregular situation, replying thus positively to one of the neighbours' original demands (Table 2). To this end, the city council makes use of a new neighbourhood census modelled on a previous census of 2013, which revealed contract irregularities in a significant amount of the inhabited dwellings.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Since its establishment in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the future of Ferrol depends on external decision-making centres such as Madrid and Brussels, demonstrating a lack of political autonomy (Clemente-Cubillas 2013). Involved into a lasting process of political peripheralisation thus, the city encounters raising difficulties to cope with the recurrent socioeconomic upheavals related to its former military and shipbuilding specialisations. In view of the above, it is easy to appreciate the linkage between the district's gradual deterioration and its longstanding process of socio-spatial marginalisation (Díaz-Leira 2017). Despite its geographical centrality, Recimil represents the outmost illustration of the city's general abandonment, receiving scarce political attention within a markedly peripheralised city.

The burst of the real estate bubble in Spain in 2008 brought out the financial weaknesses of a risky economic growth model fully contingent upon secondary circuits of capital represented by an unrivalled

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<sup>3</sup> The bulk of the rehabilitation works ever carried out in Recimil have remained in the hands of the tenants who have received a very limited financial support from the responsible public authorities (Díaz-Leira 2017).

reality of speculative urban growth (Lois-González et al. 2016). The banking system collapsed as result, wrecking a credit-based economy that caused the closure of firms and an exponential increase of unemployment and foreclosures (Cardesín & Mirás-Araujo 2017). Eager to restore its former glory and profoundly influenced by national dynamics, Ferrol also tried to boost the ultimately unprosperous construction and real estate sector as a means for diversifying its economic basis (Clemente-Cubillas 2013). However, following an antagonistic logic, the outburst of the crisis emerged as a cornerstone to secure the future of Recimil social housing district, inasmuch as it represented the exhaustion of a speculative growth model, relieving the real estate pressure that threatened the neighbourhood's future.

Along with the financial crisis though, urban shrinkage should be pointed out as a major issue to understand the district's evolution. Shrinking cities are severely stigmatised spaces, displaying mounting socioeconomic challenges, growing inequalities, and languishing resources, that discourage the attraction of investment (Filion 2013). The downward spiral affecting Ferrol stems therefore as a relevant factor to understand how the district still stands upright after decades of struggle against predatory urban purposes. In this regard, Ferrol may parallel the reality of many cities in the Global South where urban development and gentrification are often rejected by investors due to the dubious economic benefits of the eventual deals (Betancur 2014). Thus, the final outcome would probably differ in a growth context, capable of providing security in terms of immediate profitability to potential real estate investors.

The constant electoral swings fuel the lack of stability in the local policy framework, which emerges as a double-edged sword embodied through the political and urban abandonment of the city and the parallel empowerment of its neighbours. In this regard, Ferrol represents an archetypal example of "*city without policy*" showing neither a clear city vision nor an actual comprehensive policy strategy to deal with the city's most urgent challenges and pave the way for its future socioeconomic development (Cauchi-Duval et al. 2016). In parallel, Recimil district illustrates the capacity of conscious everyday resistance practices through citizens' active participation, to engender new urban agendas and reconfigure decisions concerning the urban space in the context of an ordinary city (Hall 2015). The district's dynamism shows therefore, how policy-making can be effectively influenced towards more progressive horizons drawing on the vacuum of a consistent city power and urban strategy. The experience evokes that if further organized in comprehensive collective movements, citizens' mobilisations may actually promote the emergence of progressive urban decisions (Fainstein 2010). It shows likewise the potential of urban shrinkage as a lever for the emanation of alternative bottom-up initiatives to mainstream entrepreneurial urban practices (Coppola 2014). The research reveals that shrinking cities may give rise to non-standardised actions that although limited in their real comprehensive transformative scope, may



at least interfere into the hegemonic pro-growth neoliberal urban development models (Béal et al. 2016).

Nevertheless, neighbours' success is not definitive. As pointed out by Van Eijk (2010), one of the major risks faced by this kind of civic driven bottom-up emancipatory practices is that of being transformed into prescriptive instruments to legitimate government decisions, once incorporated as regular planning procedures by the corresponding authorities in power. Other than the co-optation of resistance, the limitation of real consultation, the rebranding of urban regeneration as progressive, and tenants' internalisation of official discourses stem as additional menaces to consider in order to hamper the success of further urban redevelopment and gentrification efforts (August 2016). Thus, despite the current shift on the institutional agenda regarding the social housing district, the exhibited civic engagement should persist to hinder the deployment of renewed forms of entrepreneurial predatory urbanism threatening the social housing district.

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