Social Representation And Physical Environment: The Cerdan House, A Case of Study

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Abstract
This article reflects how social representations of the built environment are managed; how they exist in continuous relationship with those who inhabit it. They are particular representations created from experience within a value system and a culture. Thus, a change in these representations may imply a transformation of their inhabitants’ identities. Conversely, every city, landscape or territory evolves through the representation of those who inhabit it. This text studies the dialogical relationship between the physical space and the socio-mental space of the inhabitants of a valley in the Pyrenees, la Cerdanya, divided between France and Spain. The changes that have occurred in the last half century have altered the representation of the traditional house type, thus affecting the physical construction of the architecture of the place, both traditional and modern.

1. Introduction
The environment is organized in a meaningful way. Places, objects within places and the actions that we can perform with these objects have cultural meaning for people [1]. The relationship between social representations and physical environments is bidirectional [2]. Social representations in relation to physical environments are dynamically organized. A change in any architectural component of a particular environment has varying degrees of effects on all other social and cultural components of the same environment [3].

The purpose of this work is to apply recent models of cognition, space and creation of places [6], through the concrete study of the changes that have occurred between physical reality and the social representation of the traditional house in the Pyrenees in the last fifty years.

2. The Cerdan House Study
This article uses as analysis the material of a previous study on the changes in the Cerdan house in the last half century [5]. This study was part of the Inventory of the Ethnographic Heritage of Catalonia, by the Center for the Promotion of Popular and Traditional Catalan Culture, dependent on the Department of Culture of the Generalitat de Catalunya.

This work was a multidisciplinary research carried out by anthropologists and architects, which analyzed the changes that have taken place in the last fifty years in the traditional house of this Pyrenean territory. It was coordinated by the Department of Urban Anthropology, headed by Dr. Juan Josep Pujades, of the Universitat Rovira i Virgili.

La Cerdanya is a territory furrowed by many administrative lines. Despite this, the territory has always functioned as a cohesive social whole and the border has always been an economic resource for the population (smuggling…). This administrative line has not supposed a wall but a bridge that united the two territories (6) (J.J. Pujadas, 2003).
An important aspect to emphasize is that this research was not
directed by architects, but by a group of urban anthropologists, and
the architecture was a part that the latter decided to include to
understand the house in all its dimensions

The researchers understood the house as a holistic whole, as a
multifaceted reality, full of differentiated dimensions participating in
an organic entity, and there was no way to refer to one of one aspect
of this reality without referring to the whole.

We observed that the house as a content has undergone remarkable
structural and functional changes:

A. Linked to social transformations

Decrease in undivided inheritance, crisis in the residential patterns
of the main family, changes in gender relations and, above all,
transformation of the peasant unit of production, reproduction and
consumption into a productive framework dominated by the services
sector.

B. Linked to technological transformations

Much of the agricultural machinery (threshing machines, tractors
etc.), as of installations of the house, introduction of the car.

In parallel with these transformations, the house as a continent has
undergone a series of aesthetic and structural modifications, partly
driven by the new landscape of second homes that has colonized the
fothills and the plain of la Cerdanya.

We didn’t find a single answer to the crisis process of the “traditional
Cerdan house”, but we recognized a series of solutions and
alternatives to the canonical model of the house as a unit of
production and reproduction”. It is important to remark that we did
not want to work from an idealized image, avoiding the binary scheme
traditional house / modern house.

We observed how the common houses, characterized by their
plastered and painted facades and tile roofs, are increasingly being
replaced by a new type of exposed stone and wood facades with slate
roofs. This imposes a new aesthetics which is paradoxically is called
“traditional Cerdan house”. This new model applies not only to new
homes, but also to the transformations that old farmer's make of their
buildings to adapt them to new needs.

The Cerdan house has always been in a continuous process of
evolution, growth, incorporations, reforms, improvements ... Historically, life in the Pyrenees has been characterized by a slight
evolution. There has always been a slow transformation of customs
due to the legal, economic and cultural changes of traditional life, in
general, and of each family, in particular. Improvements, extensions
and transformations are being made to adapt the buildings to the life
around them. Traditionally, we find different types of interventions,
from the repair of the elements to the total reconstruction of the
building. The means used to carry out these interventions are the
materials and techniques available to them in this area and in this
regional constructive context. This involved conserving existing
structures, reusing materials.

Flexibility allows the house to adapt to changing times. We found
adaptation of old forms to new needs. Interior modifications were
possible for the construction system and the flexible use of space
(three “crujas” or ward, the organization around the multifunctional
room, the patio as a structural void...)

Currently there is a strong and rapid transformation of the
architecture, in the reforms that are applied to the old houses and
especially to the new constructions, which is related to second homes
and tourism... The change of users and the marked seasonality of the
activity that takes place there, explains the rupture of continuity with
the uses and forms of the place.

In addition, newcomers (ski tourists) project, more as customers than
as inhabitants, a distorted collective image of what the Cerdanya
house would be based more on appearances than on spatial qualities.

There are no created forms in relationship with the place, which
makes it necessary to resort to loans of elements of other mountain
architectures (Val d’Aran, Alps ... ) sufficiently fixed within the
collective imagination to ensure easy identification with the house of
tourist-residential products (brand).

This false localness materializes in elements such as wooden
balconies in the valleys, the removal of lime plaster to leave the wall
exposed (and unprotected), slate stone slabs to “dress” the brick or
congeal walls constructive falsity, generalization of the use of
the slate to cover (when in Batllia and Baridà the ceramic tile is habitual)

These “scenographic” elements are built to give credibility to the
whole, as is the case of the false bell tower of the Pleta de Saga, which
is actually a tourist villa, but which gives the “landscape” character to
this urbanization, thus making it look like a mountain village.

Also, from the urban planning regulations prior to the 90s, they order
these new constructions from a new invented type, called “traditional
house” (this phenomenon is repeated in different areas of the Spanish
Mediterranean area, such as the Balearic Islands, where the rules also
define a “type of traditional Mediterranean house” that serves to
guide the new buildings).

This is how the cultural nature of newcomers, the origin of the false
typology, becomes the deculturization of the inhabitants of the place,
who welcome (either with resignation or carelessness) the new type to
adapt to their new socio-economic reality. Moreover, the regulatory
framework encourages these changes.

3. Discussion

The relationship between architecture and memory is very close,
because as we can see in the image, memory tries to find the place of
something that has happened in the past. That is, like architecture,
both locate things in a space-time and in a social context. To lose
memory is not the same as losing the ability to register, but it is losing
the capacity to place things in a space and in a time and refer to what
they mean in a social context.

On the other hand, collective knowledge for this representation
process is understood in its threefold meaning: to represent the action
of crossing history and fiction, to represent the action of representing
and to represent a project for the future [7]. Places are the spaces for
the possibility of collective communication, therefore of memory and
narrative. We will explain memory as a source of representation and
exploration of the place, as well as the reflection on the present and
the individual and collective past.

Our hypothesis is that the place exists in a continuous relationship
with those who live there, it is a particular representation created
from experience within a system of values and culture. Therefore, a
change in this representation may imply a transformation of the
identities of its inhabitants. On the other hand, each city, landscape
and territory evolve through the representation of those who live
there.

An example of this last aspect is what happened in la Cerdanya,
which took place despite the fact that the social representations of
reality often show a resistance to change superior to that manifested
by material realities:

In la Cerdanya a symbolic construction was constructed: the climate
is more benign than in other Pyrenean valleys, the values of the
gastronomy, the architecture ... Therefore, the simulacra of a certain
reality were created, that was a copy of the reality that is sold and
purchased.

It is not so important if the houses and traditional houses were
plastered with lime mortar. The important fact here is that the new
(invented) image of the tradition has made its way and has taken root
in the natives and in the foreigners.

When the Cerdans rebuild their houses, they are adapting the existing
construction to this new aesthetic (for example, the inhabitants of the
house of “Cal Rei”, a very old house, at the request of the municipal

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architect, replaced the existing roofs by slate roofs, which are only traditional at high altitudes in the territory).

And if this process is consolidated, and now it seems fully consolidated, who dares to say that it is a mystification of reality. Progressively, a democratic and market society was built by explicit or tacit consensus. There is no doubt that the new mountain architecture (inside and outside the Cerdanya) has won the battle against the old constructive forms and the old aesthetic values.

Therefore, concerning the heritage, we see that this mirror effect plays a leading role in the process of modifying fashion and in the creation of trends. The people of Cerdanya have been adapting their reality to the images that they receive from tourists and visitors. The point here is not how simplistic and stereotypical they may have been. In the processes of social change, the predominant images, which determine the meaning and direction of change, often come from outside. Local agents tend to imitate what they see as patterns to follow or copy.

We can observe that what is being represented is not a reproduction of what has been, but it is a reinterpretation determined by the present conditions. We must think that our point of view from the present transforms the object and produces new meanings.

We can observe that in projects related to memory there is a relationship between the appearance of new figures and the resurgence of previous figures. On many occasions a figure can reveal the figures a posteriori, and at the same time distance and distortion can disfigure speech.

When there are investments, distortions, inventions, hidden memories, we find the dislocation of some elements, poor association of events and places, confusion of people, etc. [8]. Concurrently, we have learnt that false memories can be created when they can be integrated into these structures of spatio-temporal and social recognition, mostly through the studies on the representation of children's memory [9].

In La Cerdanya we can see in the ‘Traditional House’ a confusion between reality and a very complex simulation, thus making it difficult to say where one begins and the other ends. The simulacrum is not a fake, it is an idealized copy.

The partial, idealized and simplistic images that visitors have brought to La Cerdanya, are not only a small part of the county's reality, but the predominant images. We must not forget that the market is always orientated to the demand.

4. Conclusions

In this study we can see how the people, in a dialogical process, orchestrate the voices of their social and personal world influenced by past meanings and past actions in order to create new knowledge about their environment [10].

The representation of the place produced by the inhabitants is based on their own experience and their way of living in the place, as well as the cultural environment. They develop their own representations by interacting with the physical and social environment [11].

Since the avant-garde movements, the viewer plays an active role. He or she doesn’t only read the text but also constructs his/her meaning. Similarly, the recent lines of communication theory have shown this process not as a process of transmission, but as a process of recoding, where the sender has to reconstruct the received message.

The identification of the environment refers to its cognitive and symbolic processes, in Kevin Lynch’s Place-Legibility, which perceives the city as a text related to the mental representations of its inhabitants [12].

The narratives we elaborate about past times and places are very important for our orientation in the present time and in the present places, both from the point of view of the architect and the inhabitant. The representations of both interact in dialogue on the place. It is a mediated place that we transform with our representations, but at the same time this transformation affects us directly.

We must take in consideration the relationship between the shapes designed by the architect and those who inhabit it, in order to assess the impact of these representations on the physical world.

Declaration of Conflict of Interests

The author declare that there is no conflict of interest.

References