

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO SOCIÓPOLIS*?

Urban narratives: architecture, real estate crisis and living the unfinished

*Project for a City of the Future

Matilde Igual Capdevila, Dipl. Arch.

Supervisor: Univ.Prof. Mag. PhD. Elke Krasny. Akademie der Bildenden Künste Wien



Sociópolis (2003- ongoing) is an iconic “unfinished” social housing urban development in the outskirts of Valencia, Spain.

The aim of the dissertation is to provide a comprehensive study of the territory the project is inscribed in, the planning process, the political and economic context —with a particular focus on the rupture caused by the impact of real estate speculation and financial crisis in 2007/2008—, the built spaces the project has resulted in, and how the hundreds of residents inhabit and use Sociópolis today. The research on the three elements: the planned, the built, and the lived space, seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the architecture and real estate dynamics, inhabitant’s hands-on urbanism to counteract the real estate crisis and to building urban narratives that challenge the notion of the unfinished as a failure.

RESEARCH AIMS

1. The research aims to understand the conditions of production of the Sociópolis project through a historical materialist analysis exploring the relations of architecture design, real estate dynamics and real estate speculation as they are entangled with urban politics and the construction industries, particularly regarding the effects of the housing bubble and the financial crisis in the development of Sociópolis.

2. The research seeks to clarify the role of the different actors involved in the building process including architects, planners, private investors, banks and members of the public administration.

3. Through the study of the different narratives interwoven in the telling of the “unfinished” project, the research questions the notion of failure and discusses the possibilities for self-organisation in the production of urban spaces as a response to the consequences of the crisis.

PLANNED

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BUILT

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LIVED

In 2003, Sociópolis was presented at the Valencian Art Biennial under the title *Sociópolis: A Social Project*. Shortly after, it went from being a siteless utopian model to becoming a master plan for a large urban development project backed politically and funded by state owned banks. The plan envisaged the construction of 2500 housing units in the suburbs of Valencia. Thirteen well-known international architecture offices were invited to develop architectural designs for Sociópolis. In regards to architecture design, the research contextualizes Sociópolis within the current debates on the role of real estate markets in urban developments, the limits of top down architect-planned experimental masterplans, the role of architects as initiators, and the use of iconic architecture.

By retracing the consequences of the 2008 real estate crisis down to its concrete effects on the built reality of Sociópolis and in its inhabitants lived spaces, the dissertation will propose a narrative on the neoliberal entanglements of real estate and social housing architecture and on the outcomes of the crisis. The thesis will contribute to a better understanding of the question of social housing provisions and sustainable regeneration in an era where real estate industries and property markets set the agenda of urban development and the role of the government in them.



Wild flowers and a concrete skeleton

UNFINISHED ≠ FAILURE

The 2008 economic crisis led to an abrupt stop in construction activity and brought the building of Sociópolis to a halt. The project went from being “under construction” to “only half-built” exemplifying a geography of ruined, abandoned and vacant housing units that have become a symbol of the real estate fuelled crisis.

However, even though only five out of the eighteen planned towers are currently built, Sociópolis has not been abandoned, but rather presents an unfinished urban reality. In 2020, hundreds of people dwell the “unfinished” residential development and a large number of the built housing units are inhabited.

Contesting the “unfinished” as failure is at the core of the thesis. Challenging the notion of the “unfinished” focuses on the local residents as they have become the social producers of their space, their stories will form the basis for establishing new theoretical categories to speak about the “unfinished” in housing and architecture taking fully and critically into account the impact of the real estate crisis, yet not letting it overshadow the agency of the residents as they “finish” Sociópolis in their hands-on ways.

THE MEMORY OF THE LAND

Sociópolis is located next to a small and isolated settlement called La Torre, cut from the city by the river Turia and an eight lane-wide highway. Towards the east, the landscape is still made of small patches of fields where orange trees and vegetables grow. On site, five towers stand on a vast deserted plot, only partially developed. Although the site was classified as protected croplands, a special plan granted permission to develop the land given the project’s social interest. According to its proponents, Sociópolis sought to incorporate the productive rural fabric into the new development at the edge of the city, combining real estate growth with a level of preservation of autochthonous agricultural practices. This urban habitat was translated into a strong presence of urban gardens. However, the destruction of hundreds of hectares of historical orchard’s land found a strong opposition from experts, activists and citizen movements who claimed that the strong identity of the orchard’s landscape and the culture attached would not survive.



The view towards the sea from one of the buildings of Sociópolis

