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High-speed rail reshaping urban areas: Valencia Parque Central

Abstract:

High-speed became a fundamental political issue in Valencia, but also a major factor in regional planning and economic attractiveness and reactivated Valencia Parque Central project, which aim is to transform disused railways into a park and to build a station and its tracks underground. This new centrality should become the focal point of the whole urban and regional transport network. The new railway station is an old project, but it is made possible, even necessary, with the arrival of the AVE. This project relies on an ambitious underground infrastructure, above which an urban park of 23ha and a business district should be created. As a new multi-modal transport hub, it also aims to link all the urban, regional and national transport networks, which interconnection is incomplete. Political aspects are significant, because Spanish cities attach great importance to be well served by the AVE, which seems to be an element of metropolitan prestige. Nonetheless, Parque Central concrete project is limited to the development of a business district in a section of the city, and remedial measures to improve the interconnection of networks. But it does not take into account the changes of user needs in terms of mobility, especially at the metropolitan level.

Key-words: Spain, high-speed rail, railway stations, urban renewal, Valencia Parque Central, metropolis.

Since October 2010, Valencia has been connected to Madrid by the third radial high-speed rail axis. The city now intends to reach a nodal position within the network, thanks to its selected situation on the "Mediterranean corridor" project. High-speed becomes a fundamental political issue in Valencia, but also a major factor in regional planning and economic policies (Tomás Carpi, 2010). The implementation of the AVE (Spanish high-speed rail) reactivated Valencia Parque Central project, which aim is to transform disused railways into a park and to build a station and its tracks underground. This new centrality should become the focal point of the whole urban and regional transport network (Boira, 2011).

The political speech focuses on the idea of urban renewal and of an integrated project which would lead to a new centrality in the city, thanks to the implementation of the AVE. It aims to create a large urban park, together with a "CBD" (Central Business District) of two business towers, some habitation buildings and a few cultural places. Underground should be implemented a multimodal station connecting AVE, conventional railways, suburban and urban networks. But this project seems to be difficult to realise because of the lack of integration of the different elements in the master plan, and because of a political focus mainly on the high-speed infrastructure.

Nonetheless, the idea of a transit oriented development in Valencia must be nuanced regarding concrete aspects of the Parque Central station project. First, it is an urban green space renewal project, with a great symbolical dimension, in a context of increasing competition between Spanish regional metropolis, and a tool for the city to try to affirm its authority in front of regional and national institutions and its prominent place in European city networks (Boira, 2010).

The aim of this paper is to show how the argument of a transport hub for the AVE, new public spaces and an urban park to build a new centrality leads to Valencia Parque Central project being based on politically and mediatically highlighted schemes instead of responding to the city's specific problems. This question focuses attention on a strong symbolical dimension, and occults major urban transport issues.

We will first focus on the role of the implementation of high-speed rail in Valencia in the urban renewal project around a new underground railway station supposed to be a multimodal hub in public urban transports. We will then consider the main characteristics of Valencia Parque Central architecture, landscape and infrastructure project to evidence the existing gap between the idea of a transit oriented development urban plan and the vision of a symbolical metropolitan park destined to make of Valencia a visible city on Spanish metropolitan network. Finally, we will try to show Parque Central project's limits in terms of urban transports and of socially and economically sustainable development, showing that it is a political scheme over all.

1. Valencia Parque Central: an urban renewal project based on the implementation of high-speed rail

The implementation of the Madrid-Valencia AVE in October 2010 puts the third Spanish city on a high-speed rail network which has a strong symbolical importance for metropolises since the implementation of the first axis in 1992. At the same time, the project of a railway Mediterranean corridor would give Valencia the opportunity of becoming a nodal point (Ministerio de Fomento, 2010). But the high-speed national and continental scale network is used in the metropolitan political discourse to emphasize a local urban renewal project.

1.1. Valencia's position on Spanish high-speed rail networks

The link between high-speed rail and metropolitan image and attractiveness seems to be particularly strong in Spain (Bellet Sanfelui, Gutiérrez Palomero, 2011). Thus the AVE argument is used by urban planning authorities to legitimate Valencia Parque Central urban renewal project, and the other way around the city tries to take advantage of the image of that new project to pick up public and private funding.

1.1.1. Towards a nodal position

Since October 2010 Valencia has been linked to Madrid by the AVE and strengthens its position of beach and outer harbour of the capital: the travelling time by train is now 1h35. The tests and the inauguration of the new train gathered a number of political personalities at all scales, in particular Rita Barberá Nolla, mayor of the city, Francisco Camps, former president of the autonomous community of Valencia, José Blanco, former Minister of Transports, together with responsible persons from ADIF¹ and RENFE² and representatives from the Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

The project of a Mediterranean corridor, part of the TEN-T (Trans-European Networks of Transport) and connecting coastal cities together is the other axis which would give Valencia a nodal position. This axis was in March 2011 declared a priority for the Spanish government. The missing portion of high-speed railway between Tarragona and Castellón should be the first part of it to be built. The urban and regional political actors had a very strong action towards the government and the European Commission to have this Mediterranean axis added to the TEN-T, which was decided in November 2011.



Map 1- Spanish high-speed rail networks

¹ ADIF (Administrador De Infraestructuras Ferroviarias) is the Spanish state-owned company in charge of the management of railway infrastructure.

² RENFE (Red Nacional de los Ferrocarriles Españoles) is the state-owned company which operates freight and passenger trains in Spain.

The nodal position of Valencia at these two railways connection, together with its important Mediterranean harbour, is part of the metropolitan process of the city.

1.1.2. High-speed and the city: an ambivalent relationship

The AVE has got a very strong symbolical importance for Valencia. It is the sign that the city joined the very select club of high-speed connected Spanish metropolises, which could be source of economic and demographic attractiveness. That's why the AVE is ubiquitous in the city and its projects. Around the two current railway stations (the Estació del Nord for conventional Iberian Gauge trains, and Joaquín Sorolla station for European gauge AVE), a lot of advertising is present to point out the supposed structuring effects of high-speed for the city.



Picture 1- Piece of advertising concerning the AVE Madrid-Valencia, in Joaquín Sorolla station. © E. Libourel, 2011

Valencia Parque Central project is presented as a metropolitan planning element directly related to the AVE and to its supposed effects. Thus it mentions an underground multimodal hub and a business district aimed at receiving the firms that the city hopes to attract. Nonetheless, Parque Central is first of all an urban park and landscape project, which was previously designed. It is part of a planning policy of metropolitan renewal and symbolical prestige started in the 1980's (Borja, Muxí, 2004).

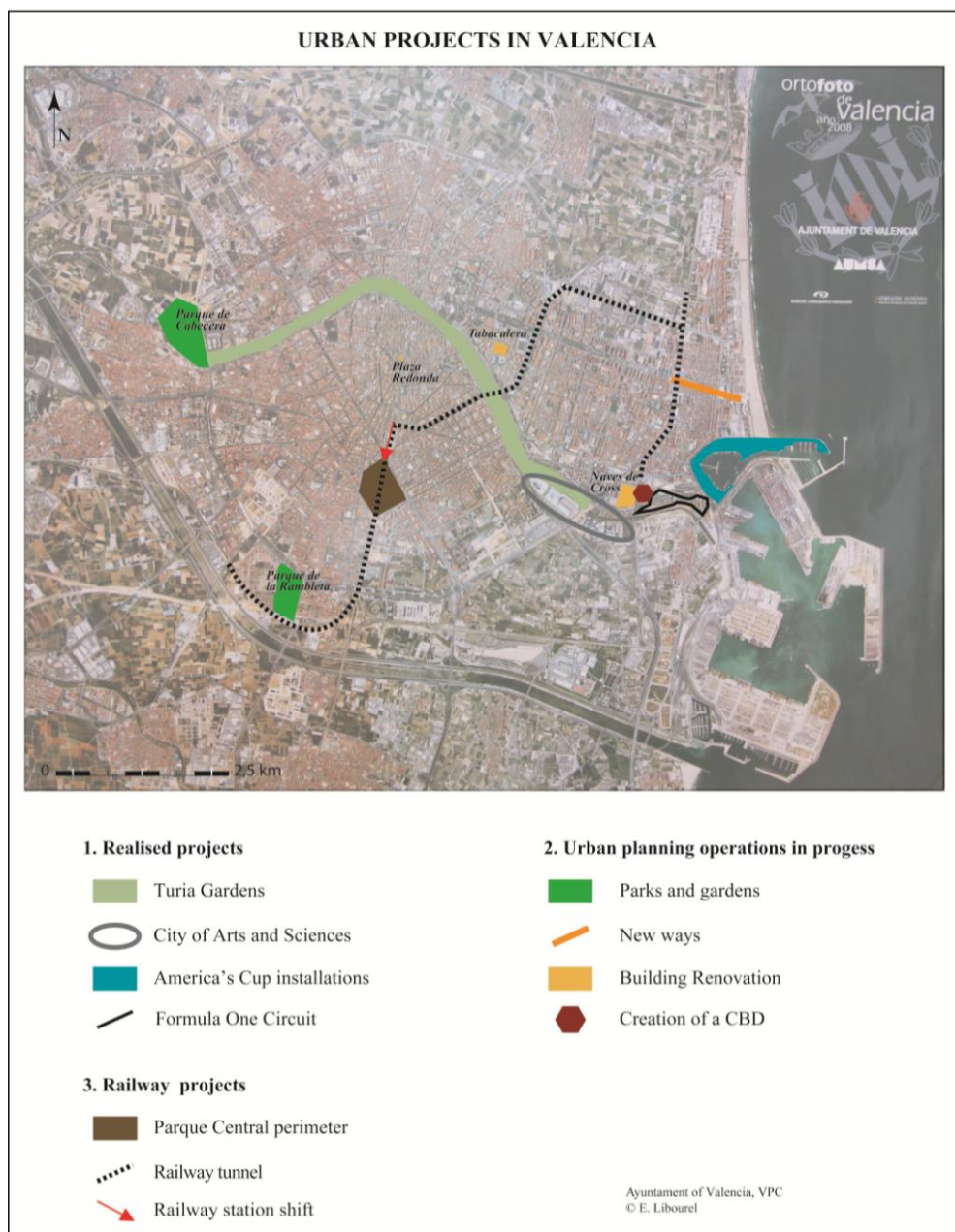
Today, the reactivation of Valencia Parque Central project, based on the idea of a new attractiveness and an increased proximity to Madrid, is made possible by the creation of an *ad hoc* Valencia Parque Central Society assembling the city, the region, the government, ADIF and RENFE to reach funding for the project.

1.2. Archaeology of a project reactivated by the implementation of the AVE

Valencia Parque Central project was launched in its current form on October 17, 2009. Even if it is nowadays presented as a brand new program, symbol of modernity, it was actually first presented in the 1980's during a period of intense architectural and urban

renewal in Valencia. At this time, the project wasn't linked to the railway. It is now reactivated and adapted to the very actual issues.

Parque Central project appeared in 1985 preliminary studies of PGOU³ and was confirmed in the 1988 version of the document. It was part of the main Valencian projects of turning away the Turia River to make a green corridor, and of reshaping several urban areas as the famous City of Arts and Sciences of Santiago Calatrava and Felix Candela (Simó, 2004). Parque Central has been the object of architectural competitions in 1989, 1996 and 1998. At the moment, the urban authorities, who couldn't support the entire cost of it, failed to realise the park, which took a new impetus in 2003 with the official support of the Spanish government and the promise of the arrival of the AVE in Valencia.



Map 2- Urban renewal projects since the 1980's

³ The PGOU (*Plan General de Ordenación Urbana*) is the local urban planning document.

In the first project, Valencia Parque Central was limited to an urban park designed to reshape the large wasteland for now occupied by the tracks, and to reduce the disconnection due to the presence of the infrastructure. However, at that time, building underground tracks was not associated with the project of a transport hub to replace the Estació del Nord: a project of park from the centre to the south of the city was designed by the Portuguese architect Patricia Choraó (1998 Thyssen price of architecture).

The arrival of the AVE and the prospect of the "Mediterranean corridor" revived the project for several reasons. First, it made it necessary to modernise the train station and to transform it into a multi-modal transport hub which could receive both conventional Iberian gauge and high-speed European gauge trains. Secondly, the increasing preoccupation for sustainable development gave the project an impulse: this park would reinforce the nature presence in the city. Finally, the participation of the Spanish government, the Valencian autonomous community, ADIF and RENFE, through Valencia Parque Central society, draws funding for the project and inscribes it into multi-scales considerations.

These new economic, social and above all political conditions allowed the project to come back under the spotlight. The new version was adapted to make it coherent with the new fashionable themes and political priorities.

Thus the AVE is a decisive factor for the implementation of Valencia Parque Central project, as far as it is reshaped to look like a transport hub of national, regional and urban interest. The idea of a transit-oriented development, which would lead to a mixed-used district surrounding the central station, is called to mind as a possibility. Nonetheless the question of the real impact of this urban project has to be considered.

2. Multimodal transport hub vs symbolical metropolitan park

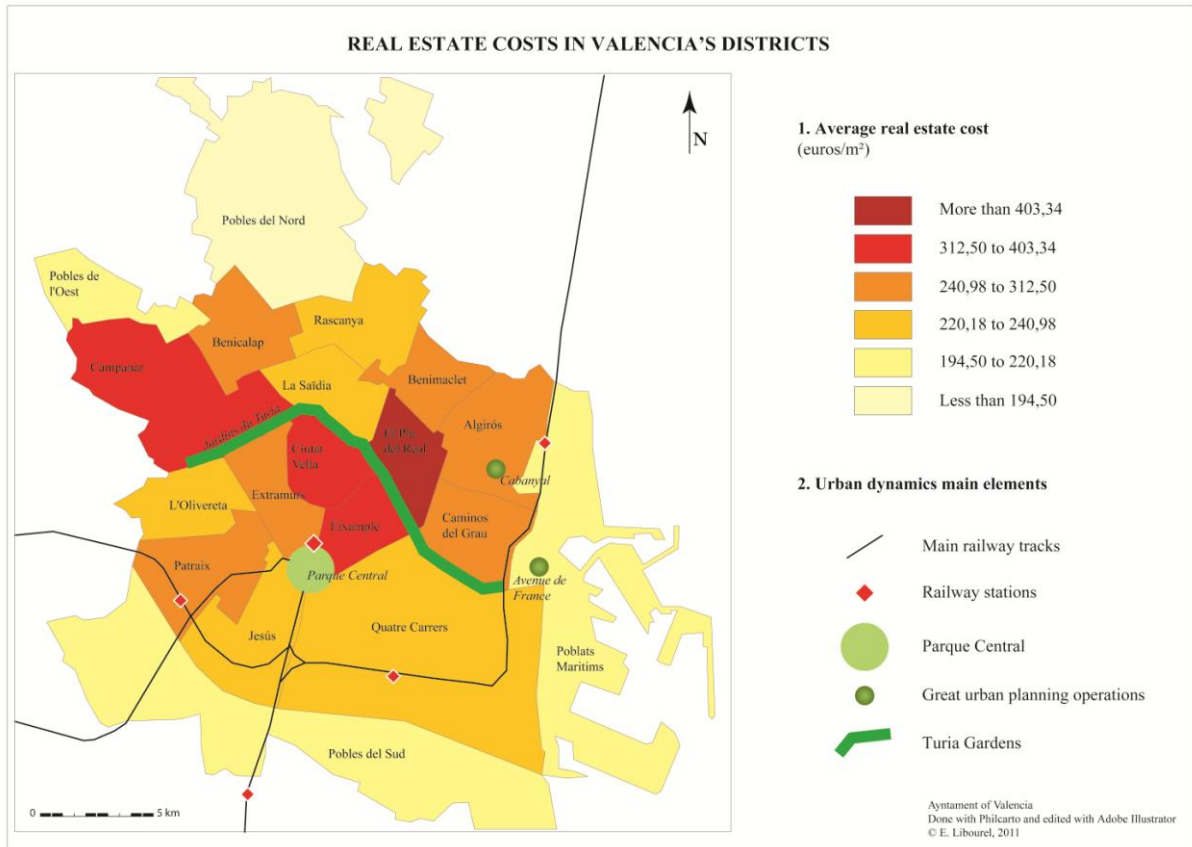
Valencia Parque Central is an ambiguous urban planning project. Many questions remain concerning the nature of the plans and the realisation on one hand, and the expectations of political personalities at municipal and regional levels (Romero, 2009). Therefore we would like to discuss the part of each element (urbanism, transportation, environment...) of the project in the plans, and to confront them to the mainstream discourse about the future central district of Valencia.

2.1. Actual district, actual transport system and the necessary urban renewal

Parque Central is both an urban renewal plan concerning the south of Valencia's centre, and a transportation program. It occupies an important position in the city and concerns more than 20ha at the junction of four districts with different socio-economic characteristics.

2.1.1. Four districts concerned by the project

The perimeter of Valencia Parque Central project extends on four districts: Eixample in the north-west, Extramurs in the north-east, Jesús in the south-east and Quatre Carreres in the south-west. These districts have quite different socio-economic characteristics.



Map 3- Real estate costs in Valencia's districts

Extramurs and the Eixample are in immediate contact with the old city centre, and the second is known for its architectural heritage. Both districts are quite well-off, as demonstrated by municipal economics statistics⁴. But Jesús and Quatre Carreres, in the south, are quite poor and degraded. Urban landscape is marked by decrepit collective habitation buildings and some “hollow tooth” locations, namely urban wastelands.

In the middle of this heterogeneous urban context, the Parque Central project is supposed to create new connections and to impulse a larger urban renewal, thanks to a vast park and better connections to the urban transports. Nonetheless, this would only be possible if Valencian urban planning services provided other projects in the same sector. In contrast, Parque Central seems to be envisaged independently of its context.

⁴ Statistics service of the Ayuntamiento de Valencia.

2.1.2. A lack of connection for public transports

Concerning the transportation aspect of Valencia Parque Central, some lacks can be noted both at infrastructural and conception levels. To be able to receive the AVE in 2010, Valencia built Joaquín Sorolla station, with European gauge tracks. This new station is located on the south of the Estació del Nord, 700m away. It is made of reusable materials because it is supposed to be demolished as soon as the new underground central station will be in operation. For now, the AVE reaches in a disconnected station, far away from the centre, from the conventional station and from any public transport. Moreover, neither the representatives of Valencia Parque Central society, or the regional delegate of ADIF and the town planning services, seem to be able to provide details about the future station and its technical aspects. Even the most trivial of them are occult: how many tracks, how many floors in the basement, which interconnection with the subway system, what room for shops and services?



Map 4- Parque Central and its incomplete connection to urban networks

The question of the connection to public transports is also essential in Parque Central project. According to what urban planning services can tell⁵, connecting railway, subway and bus is a priority, and it will become possible thanks to the new underground intermodal hub. But if we consider the elements of the project as presented to the public, the interconnection is not so evident. The underground central station will be built behind the Estació del Nord, so that it will be quite far from Xàtiva and Belén subway stations. For the time being, no new station has been planned, and the only solution is to build underground corridors to existing stations.

Finally, the investments provided for a new subway line and for the connection of the AVE in Valencia, with the hypothesis of a north-south underground tunnel to connect to the Mediterranean corridor, doesn't take into account the problems of metropolitan mobility (Albertos *et al.*, 2007). Nothing is expected to be done to improve mobility in the agglomeration of Valencia, while the existing networks by rail and road are already congested.

2.1.3. Political metropolitan interests and local needs

These elements can be partly explained by the political context of the implementation of Valencia Parque Central project. It is not only the context of the high-speed rail connection of the city, but also of complex actors interactions at all levels.

As the institutional structure of Valencia Parque Central society shows, the main actors implicated in the project are regional and national. At an urban level, the mayor's political choices are turned towards the pursuit of a modern metropolitan image more than towards social equity aims. The AVE is in fact a strong element of inscription of a city in a select network of high-speed connected cities, opening to Spain and Europe. By concentrating the interests of different political levels on the AVE, it makes it possible to realise Parque Central project as a prestigious urban landscape element more than as a social equity urban renewal plan.

Thus, even if the context of deterioration of the neighbourhoods and the lack of connectivity of urban transports should lead to a project for reshaping this central area, political aims disconnected from local preoccupations are leading to a prestige metropolitan project.

2.2. The actual project

The actual Parque Central Project reactivates the previous one, but tries to link it with the implementation of AVE to have a favorable context. It allows funding by different scales

⁵ Interviews in Valencia, march 2011.

actors, together in Valencia Parque Central society as we have shown before. Thus it is interesting to accurately analyse the modalities of the project.

2.2.1. Gustafson Porter project

Parque Central seems to be the alpha and omega of all current urban projects in Valencia, as shown by interviews with political, economic and academic actors⁶. The idea is to create a new centrality within the south of the old town and away from the port area, emphasizing a better city life and environmental quality to improve the attractiveness of the area. The project, according to the political discourse of the municipality and of the Valencia Parque Central society, aims to create a metropolitan dynamic based on accessibility and amenities offered to investors and citizens.

“Aigua plena de seny⁷” is the chosen architecture project for the park, by Gustafson-Porter, an American landscape design firm associated with Spanish engineering firms. The project, as it is presented by Valencia Parque Central society⁸, occults much of the technical and infrastructural issues. It emphasizes the continuity with previous achievements of urban planning in Valencia, as evidenced by the documents presenting the project: *“It’s inspired on water, irrigation, the Turia, the sea, the Albufera, the huerta. It rises from the elements that configure our natural landscape and it flows into those of the artificial landscape configured by men in a big city as Valencia. It is designed to become a new centre in the urban shape and to establish continuity between districts that have been separated for decades”*⁹.

Therefore, the project is divided into six parts, isolated by trees but always connected, and leaving a large place for water as a transition between them. Some of the actual railway logistic buildings will be preserved and converted into exhibition or cultural performance places. The aim is to provide an open public area, which nevertheless could be separated into several little nucleuses with different atmospheres and uses. From a social point of view, the park should reconnect the districts which are today separate from each other because of the tracks. It should also impulse a mixed frequentation of the place. Economically, the conjunction of a great park area and a high-speed connected hub is supposed to attract investors to the new business district, whereas habitation buildings would reinforce the mix functions of the place. Environmentally speaking, the insistence on green spaces and ecological water recuperation systems focuses on the idea of a sustainable urban development.

The connection between the park and the underground hub is symbolised by the course of water in the park. A little river will indicate the main direction of the tracks, and a pool with a transparent bottom will let see the trains.

⁶ Interviews realized in Valencia, March 2011.

⁷ Strictly speaking « Meaningful water ». It is a verse of the Valencian poet Ausiàs March. Reference to water is very significant, because it is omnipresent in Valencian urbanism, especially since the conversion of the Turia. Parque Central should have several pools.

⁸ www.valenciaparquecentral.es

⁹ Quote from the leaflet of the exhibition in the Palacio de Cervelló.

2.2.2. A three phases realisation?

As it is impossible to stop railway circulation in Valencia during the underground and park works, a three phases realisation is planned. It should also make the funding of the realisation easier.

The first step consists in the transformation of the eastern part of the tracks wasteland into a first part of the park. It is the easier step because it doesn't imply either to stop the traffic or to dig any underground tunnel. This phase goes together with the construction of two business towers, the sale of which should fund the second part of the works.

The second step consists in digging the tunnel and the underground central station. It should be the longest phase, even if the responsible of ADIF and Valencia Parque Central society couldn't tell how long it would last. During this period, the Estació del Nord will be unattainable and the whole traffic will be received in Joaquín Sorolla station, which means a reduction of the number of daily trains. Once the underground station is finished, the western part of the park will be realised.

The third step is the realisation of this western part of the park. Normally, Joaquín Sorolla station should then be demolished and the park finished. In the interviews realised in Valencia, nobody could tell how long the completion of the whole project would last.

The function of the park as a public space is obvious. Its interconnection role with the new underground station, according to the general duty of multimodal transport hubs (Grillet-Aubert, Guth, 2003) is also evidenced. However the urban design project is clearly dominant and it is the only part which has clearly been defined.

The gap between Valencia Parque Central plan and its political and media use gives the impression that the project was drawn to give a modern and dynamic image of the city, and to strengthen political cohesion in turn of a highly symbolical element, in a Spanish context of competition between metropolis and political authorities at different scales. Therefore it seems to be marked by a series of deficiencies.

3. Urban transport deficiencies for an urban future project

Valencia Parque Central is a real paradox: it is presented as a transport hub and a transit-oriented development plan, but the part of transports is the less developed and the more hypothetical in the project. Even though the AVE is ubiquitous, the architectural project seems to ignore infrastructure. The railway material aspects only appear secondarily in comparison to the question of public spaces, as if infrastructure was to be cleared in benefit of the park. The drawings of the Gustafson-Porter master plans don't seem to take technical aspects into account.

3.1. Structuring effects for a new transit-oriented developed centrality?

According to the project as it is presented, transports at all scales are in the centre of it. Nonetheless, they seem an element of urban planning language, a justification of the project, but not really a motor element.

3.1.1. The presupposition of AVE structuring effects

As shown before, the implementation of high-speed rail gave a new impulse to Parque Central project and made it possible. This vision is closely linked to the presupposition of high-speed structuring effects according to which the conjunction of an AVE hub and an urban renewal project would strengthen the attractiveness of the city. The two planned business towers are supposed to draw companies to the new centrality of Valencia, creating a sort of “CBD”, well connected to a multimodal high-speed and urban transports station. By doing this, Valencia follows several European examples of implementation of business districts around new hubs in Rotterdam, Lille, Lyon (Terrin, 2011)... Parque Central could then become a major centre in the city.

Even if this kind of approach is scientifically contested (Offner, 1993) as a “political myth” and a “scientific mystification”, it still has an urban reality as far as planning is concerned. In Valencia, the AVE is ubiquitous in the announcements in the city. Both railway stations get signboards to show the positive effect of high-speed for the city. The theme is even appropriated by popular culture and it was present in some *fallas*¹⁰ in 2011.

3.1.2. Transit-oriented development for Valencia?

Parque Central urban renewal project aims both to create a multimodal transport hub and to improve lifestyle and economic amenities. Therefore it proposes a mix activity area coupling a business district with habitation buildings, a transport hub and commercial activities. Thus Parque Central corresponds to a TOD (Transit-Oriented Development) project.

It is coupled with a symbolical centrality based on the transformation of the urban shape and the requalification of public spaces. The park is supposed to link districts for now separated by the tracks, and to become a social exchange space (thanks to spare-time activities, cultural events...). The aim of creating a new centrality is linked to the aim of improving urban transport services. Therefore, the new underground railway station is

¹⁰ The *Fallas* are a Valencian annual celebration held to commemorate Saint-Joseph. The term *Fallas* refers both to the celebration and to the monuments created to be exhibited and burnt during this week.

planned to be directly connected to the subway. According to the master plans, a station of the future line 2 will be built together with the train station, and corridors will lead to the nearest stations of lines 1 and 3. A bus station gathering urban and suburban services is also planned behind the actual Estació del Nord.

But for now, urban planning authorities are not able to explain the modalities of those works and the complexity of the three phases realisation plan questions the possibility of the achievement of the whole project. Moreover, the plans for urban transports connections, as shown before, are very incomplete because they don't include a real interconnection subway station. For now, the AVE is received in a temporary station which could remain in place for quite a long time. The economical context of crisis (Baron-Yellès, 2010) could actually postpone the works and lead to a reduction of the investments.

3.1.3. A polycentric model

A last element stresses the deficiencies of Valencia Parque Central project: it is thought as a new centrality for the city, but it is actually part of a polycentric model. Since the 1980's, Valencia created several new districts, in particular around the City of Arts and Sciences. Nowadays a project of business district near the port is also being realised, and its works have already begun. The attractiveness of Parque Central, even if it is connected to the AVE, is not sure in this context, because it will be achieved later.

The hub function is an integrant part of the project, but it seems to put together existing transportation elements without proposing a real functional reorganisation of the system. The preliminary TOD model is also questioned by uncertainties concerning the realisation of the project.

3.2. No impact studies for the city

Uncertainties remain as far as the future of Parque Central sector is concerned beyond the project's limits. The development plan associated with the Parque Central area takes into account a quite broad perimeter, exceeding the area of the park and extending on the south to Martínez Carrasco Avenue (ring road), between the streets San Vicente Mártir and Malilla. In this sector, the main point is the development of an urban boulevard on the corridor released by the construction of underground tracks, and the improvement of degraded habitations.

In the districts of Jesús and Quatre Carreres, adjacent to the railway perimeter and quite poorly equipped, land prices could increase significantly with the transformation of the neighbourhood. Interviews with the Valencian planning department and with a person in charge of the Parque Central society revealed a very liberal vision: the market will regulate

prices and current residents, if their property's value appreciates, will gain. But this point of view doesn't take into account the question of the tenants, who couldn't support increased rates. Thus a strong social deficit is felt in the project.



Jesús district, in front of Joaquín Sorolla station, © E. Libourel, 2011



Jesús district, near the tracks, © E. Libourel, 2011



Jesús district, near the footbridge upon the tracks, © E. Libourel, 2011



Quatre Carreres district, near the wasteland, © E. Libourel, 2011

Picture 2- Jesús and Quatre Carreres districts

A final element of doubt: the future of the Estació del Nord, listed as a national heritage. The building will be kept but it will no longer receive railway traffic. Several hypotheses are under study, as the transformation of the building in a mall or an office building. The final decision has not yet been taken. This very point reinforces the impression that the project is submitted to numerous uncertainties.

Building the urban future of Valencia seems to be creating symbolic high value images, without a real connection to the imperatives of an integrated urban renewal, which would take into account the whole city and its diverse elements. Once again, as it was the case for the projects of the 1990's, urban planning focuses on a few visible spots and misses an encompassing metropolitan vision.

Conclusion:

The study of Valencia Parque Central project shows a particular case of urban renewal closely linked to the implementation of high-speed. The project is presented as a TOD urban renewal plan, including business, habitation and commercial activities organised around an intermodal transport hub. The AVE is supposed to create a dynamic impulse for the activities of the district and of the city. But if we accurately analyse the contents of the project, we can see that it relies on the presupposition of structuring effects of high-speed and that it is characterised by a lack of integration of the project into the urban context. Moreover, the actual economic conjuncture endangers the achievement of this new centrality.

The actors concerned by Valencia Parque Central project are mainly at a national and regional level, which demonstrates that the main interests for it are not to be found at a very local scale. The question is actually the image of the city in a context of political and economical competition between the principal Spanish cities, and between the regions.

The political and media symbol associated to high-speed rail and to the construction of new stations, often underground, in association with urban reshaping projects is not limited to Valencia. It is actually the case in several other Spanish countries, as if the urban competition, at a national but also European level, would include a contest for symbolical prestige infrastructures.

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