Neoliberal Governance and Vernacular Building Systems:
The case of Spain

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ABSTRACT: This paper claims that increasing neoliberal forms of governance are found in construction systems in Spain. This fact becomes especially problematic when addressing vernacular construction systems. Both policy and technological management are becoming more focused on the consolidation of "expert systems", and less on a 'different' and particular vernacular system; and thus shaping both mind and action.

The empirical evidence presented throughout this paper is based on an ethnographic approach in Catalonia, allowing a further investigation on the complexity of the most common building systems.

Material collected from empirical research on local construction vernacular systems shows how the functioning of a distinct set of managing 'technologies' - embedded in specific practices such as auditing - is instrumental and enables shaping local constructive practices.

Under the current conditions, even local aspects are deeply penetrated and outlined by social influences generated by a great distance between them. This has a significant impact on vernacular building systems, as they have been being diluted, when not erased.

KEYWORDS: Neo-liberalism, construction governance, OCT, vernacular building systems, Spain

1. INTRODUCTION

Governance, understood as a way of explaining the establishment and exercise of political power, involves the regulation of populations through multiple institutions and technologies in society [1]. Originally, most studies of governance were generally abstracted from actually existing subjects and spaces, and therefore not adequately engaging how, and in which ways people are constituted and ruled as neoliberal subjects through the many «technologies» and «assemblages» of power, so brilliantly outlined by the theorists [1,2]. However, much progress has already been made in this regard. In fact, governance has been studied in different society's field, from managing of agro-environments to child minding and education. However, the field of architecture is still missing a deep analysis on building systems.

The subject of building systems is not different from other research areas, where it is possible to see governance taking place, but until now very little studies shed light in this specific practice area. That is the case of vernacular building systems, which consist of a particular type of building systems still requiring some research on how governance is happening and its consequences.

In this specific and practical research topic, it is very suitable what Rose and Miller [3] stress on the relevance of knowledge and expertise on modern forms of governance, since this is intrinsically linked to the activities of expertise enacting assorted attempts at the calculated administration of diverse kinds of construction through countless, often competing, tactics of education, persuasion, inducement, management, incitement, motivation and encouragement. In fact, these technologies aim to make reality "stable, mobile, comparable, combinable", thereby enabling government to act upon it [3].

Therefore, neoliberalism is a key-concept to understand, as it defines the current era [4]. The main focus of Foucault was to discover which kind of rationality has been used, since political rationality is no neutral knowledge, rather an element of government itself that helps creating a discursive field, in which exercising power is "rational" [5].

However, Foucault rejected crude "capital-logic" arguments on socio-economic development and state-centered accounts, as Foucault's analyses of discipline and governance try to explain the reason for economic exploitation and political domination [6]. This takes place between political strategies and the activities of these authorities in attempts to modulate events, decisions and actions in the economy, the family, the private firm, and the conduct of an individual [3].

This paper attempts to analyse neoliberal governance in building systems in Spain through an investigation of management technologies applied, and its impact on vernacular building systems in Catalonia, Spain.

This paper is structured into 4 sections: Firstly, a brief literature review of some recent discussions on governance and neo-liberalism is presented, so that it is possible to infer what it is happening in the building system field. The second section presents management technologies applied in building systems. In the third section is explained the methodology used along the research. The fourth section focuses on the analysis of the impact of this

management technology in common vernacular systems, particularly focusing on the specific case of Catalonia (Spain). The main conclusions are presented in the final section.

2. CONSTRUCTION GOVERNANCE AND NEO-LIBERALISM

Government's concept is "the regulation of conduct by the more or less rational application of the appropriate technical means" [7, p.106]. Foucault takes this concept in its more original meaning, as conduct, or more precisely, as "the conduct of conduct", and thus as a term which ranges from "governing the self" to "governing others". That is to say, his efforts were focused on showing how the modern state and the autonomous modern individual are entangled and co-dependent.

Through the concept of governmentality, Foucault related technologies of being with technologies of domination. This article aims to use the concept of governmentality to relate the construction decisions made by architects and other technicians with the technologies of domination analysed by the philosopher. Thus, showing how these technologies also act in the construction activity, since alike other areas of human activity they follow the guidelines set in the foundations of the formation of the neoliberal state. Therefore, governmentality is a "key-notion" [8] to understand the path followed by building system in the late modern period.

Governing people is not a way to force people to do what the governor wants; it is always a versatile equilibrium, with complementarity and conflicts between techniques that assure coercion and processes, through which the self is constructed or modified by himself [9]. Structuring and shaping the field of possible action of subjects through a heterogeneous array of regulatory practices and technologies ends up as a reformulation of how to apply coercion or consensus, in which the latter is applied from «autonomous» individuals' capacity for self-control [8].

Government refers to more or less systemic, regulated and reflected modes of power that go beyond the spontaneous exercise of power over others, following a specific form of reasoning rationality, which defines the telos of action or the adequate means to achieve it. Therefore, technologies of government refer to strategies, techniques and procedures through which different authorities seek to enact programmes of government in relation to the materials and forces at hand, and the resistances and oppositions anticipated or encountered [10].

Nevertheless, it is important to point out that they are not technologies or programmes of government that act, but rather the social forces deploying these technologies and programmes for their own particular

purposes [11]. From this perspective, political programmes are defined in terms of the underlying *rationalities* that shape their development [12]. In this respect it is plausible to suggest that auditing is fundamentally an ideologically driven system for disciplining and controlling architects, and so on (cf. [13]).

In this regard, neo-liberalism is a core analytics to understand the transformations of space and social practice that define that current era [4]. Specifically, the bounding with the production of neoliberal mentalities of rule – particularly attempts to enforce market logics to create conditions, in which competition can flourish to depoliticize various social struggles over resources and rights [14].

Neo-liberal rationalities consist of a number of ideologically coherent political precepts drawn together by a fundamental belief in the superiority of free market over intervention by the apparatuses of state [15]. Therefore, neoliberal forms of governing tend to extend market relations into every domain [16]. The increasing penetration by market instruments, and more broadly the 'market', into the governing of construction systems is a characteristic feature of what is named along this paper as "neo-liberalization of building systems". In relation to building systems management, market instruments may be defined as those initiatives that 'aim to mobilize individual incentives in favour of positive outcomes through a careful calculation and modulation of costs and benefits associated with particular building systems strategies'.

Neo-liberal forms of governing are typically viewed as colonizing the social, through processes of marketization, privatization and deregulation, in which the state takes a minimal role [17]. However, increasing recognition has been given to the role played by state agencies in making markets work efficiently [18]. Neo-liberal forms of governing enable governments to give the appearance of addressing safety construction, and at the same time securing the conditions for further capitalist accumulation (cf. [19]). But until now, little attention has so far been paid to the consequences for the neo-liberalization of building systems.

2.1 Relevance of neo-liberal governmentality in building systems

The relevance and the potential contribution of the concept of neo-liberal governmentality in building systems might be clearer regarding three main areas:

- Concept of "political knowledge". Foucault seems to offer an extremely important and productive way to understand the relation between governmental practices and territory, namely how space is rendered, subject to mathematical modelling and control [20]. It steers rather than dictates through processes of

abstraction and simplification [21]. There is more to state spatialization, though, than policing or repression. It may be more important to look at the less dramatic, multiple, mundane domains of bureaucratic practice, through which states reproduce spatial orders and scalar hierarchies. That is to say, it is the 'know how' that has promised to make government possible [3]. Furthermore, the states are not simply functional bureaucratic apparatuses, but powerful sites of symbolic and cultural production [22].

- Concept of market independence from state affairs. Foucault pointed out that the power of the economy rested on a previous "power economy"; since the accumulation of capital implies production technologies and forms of work that allow using a multitude of human beings in an economically profitable way. Foucault located strategy not in actors but in dispositive, which, in turn, are the outcome of, rather than condition, or determine, dynamics in local settings, where a microphysics of power continuously creates new relationships between knowledge and the exercise of power [21].

-Domination and technologies of the self. Developing indirect techniques to lead and control individuals. Government is the historically matrix that articulates all those dreams, schemes, strategies and manoeuvres of authorities, seeking to shape the beliefs and conduct of others in desired directions, by acting upon their will, their circumstances or their environment [3]. One key feature of the neoliberal rationality is the congruence it endeavours to achieve between a responsible and moral individual, and an economic-rational individual.

On the field of building systems, auditing is a key instrument of the 'new public management', as auditing emphasizes the 'control of control' through its characteristic focus on the effectiveness of expert systems, which are "systems of technical accomplishment or professional expertise that organize large areas of the material and social environments in which we live today" [23, p. 27]. Therefore, audit management enables the dispersed state to function effectively in controlling services to an individualized public.

The task is to draw attention to the social and creative processes, through which a state verticality becomes effective and authoritative in this particularly field of human activity, the building systems, and how this affects the use of vernacular building systems.

Vernacular building systems, until well into modernity, has been following the principle of tradition anchored to the place. The predominant source of their organization and construction was this old order of traditional society. Therefore, vernacular building systems are a critical field, where these new mundane practices often slip below the threshold of

discourse, but profoundly alter how oriented, and how technicians are formed. Newly established systems of auditing may have damaged local cultures of first order practice. Such a practice-oriented conception calls for an ethnographic approach.

3. MANAGEMENT TECHNOLOGIES IN THE CONSTRUCTION SYSTEMS FIELD IN SPAIN

On May 6th 2000 the Spanish Building Ordinance Law came into force [24]. Accordingly, the developer becomes responsible for the building insurance. Therefore, at this time, the audit processes developed by the insurers were indirectly established by law. The Insurance Companies, most of them grouped in the Spanish Union of Insurance and Reinsurance Entities (UNESPA), try to develop technical documents approximating a real risk assessment, which involve the hiring of the only compulsory insurance, the Decennial Insurance.

It may be that a lack of faith in architects and technicians related to construction issues has led to the creation of industries for overseeing, in order to satisfy a demand for signals of order. However, the key-point is that 'any level of risk' is now considered unacceptable; risk must be avoided at all costs [25]. It is what Amoore and de Goede [26] named precautionary risk, the risk beyond risk'.

Claim Statistics recognize that 43% of these are due to project errors, 30% to poor execution, 15% to material defect, 8% to lack of proper maintenance, and the remaining claims are due to other factors [27]. Given the importance of the risks, the immediate approach of the insurance companies was to find the right figure to carry out the inspection and expert work, with sufficient knowledge, responsibility and independence to support their insurance. This was carried out through the performance of recognized expert technicians [28], and the establishment of a definition and control system for the different construction processes. It was also needed to create companies with the necessary economic solvency that could take on this new task. Hence the creation of the so-called Technical Control Organizations (OCT). In order to subscribe a Ten-Year Insurance, an OCT must be hired, which will be in charge of the technical control of the work, and of issuing a series of essential reports for the insurance and entry into force of the ten-year insurance, attending to three points: project control, execution control and control of trials.

The control of the project implies to assess the reason for the chosen solutions, the adequate definition for a correct execution, the qualities and characteristics of the different elements, as well as an adequate and correct definition of the budget. The control of the execution consists in verifying that it is carried out following the definition established in the project, the current regulations, as well as the technical knowledge

sanctioned by practice. The control of tests verifies the follow-up of the quality control plan, and the suitability of the tests carried out, as well as the request for new ones, if necessary.

On the other hand, there are three basic criteria to be met by OCT technical agents: independence, technical expertise and non-biased assessment. Independence is guaranteed with the absence of conflicts of interest with the works being audited. On the other hand, non bias has not yet a specific method of control defined. Technical expertise must be accredited, but in Spain it is difficult to control due to the official absence of this field of activity [28]. This fact has caused to implement initially other control processes by the OCT themselves, in order to ensure this parameter based on the experience of technicians and type of work to be audited, and the volume and height of the work, as well as the type of terrain and its construction characteristics. Behind this, there is the principle that regulatory systems rely increasingly upon 'control of control' [13].

OCT is the technology of government implemented in the building field, through which political rationalities become capable of deployment. In this way, complex assemblage of diverse forces comes to be regulated with authoritative criteria through mundane mechanisms that enable to rule 'at a distance'. Since 2000, the auditing of this internal control for self-checking arrangements has become a growing industry (cf. [29]).

4. METHOD

In the present research, an ethnographic approach was used, based on three main elements. On the one hand, 63 semi-structured interviews with relevant agents, in the context of refurbishment, were conducted, specifically with 28 architects, 21 builders, and 14 materials distributors, masons, and other professionals. The criterion for conducting the interviews was the saturation of the sample. In other words, interviews were conducted until the answers became repetitive.

On the other hand, participant-observation of work sites in Catalonia has been another paramount tool. This professional experience allowed a close knowledge of the activities of agents. This also endorsed a deeper investigation of the complexity of the construction solutions commonly used.

It will be tried to provide a schematic account of the interactions between actors and processes operating on diverse spatial scales, and the ways in which these interactions ultimately crystallize into specific ways of building systems.

5. HOW MANAGEMENT TECHNOLOGY (OCT) AFFECTS VERNACULAR CONSTRUCTION SYSTEMS

The area of study is one of the regions of Old Catalonia (Catalunya Vella), the Baix Empordà.

The transformation of the practices in vernacular building systems that OCT module can be evidenced by analysing three particular building systems of the region: the tile vaults, the structural use of ordinary masonry walls, and the use of local wood species.

5.1 Construction of tile vaults

The traditional tile vault has three defining characteristics: construction without formwork, the use of gypsum paste as a binder, and the use of brick. Traditionally, the execution of the first sheet was the most delicate phase, since it required the most mastery on the part of the operator. The binding material was gypsum due to its rapid setting, a fact of vital importance, as it is what made it possible to dispense with the formwork in most cases, and the low weight of the ceramic piece; and once finished, the subsequent layers were folded and carried out, if there were any.

Figure 1: Traditional Tile Vault

With the entry of the OCT, the continuation of the use of this vernacular constructive system depended on the validation through mathematical modelling tools of future behaviour in the face of the different situations throughout its useful life. Insurers demanded the introduction of a concrete layer, which would provide the security afforded by a predictive mathematical model that is associated to this material. Tile vault system, until this moment, was anchored to the tradition, one of the legitimate bases of management of the actions of community life in the past.

OCT also have become influential agents of change, since the way of understanding human progress comes to be governed by trust in the scientific-technical domain, and less consideration is granted to the empirical knowledge accrued over time [30].

5.2 Structural use of ordinary masonry walls.

The walls traditionally fulfilled two specific functions: as a structural element, where the wooden beams or

165

vaults were supported; and as a room divider, exterior and interior. As for the fulfilment of the two functions, they had, in both cases, the thickness of the walls. With the appearance of OCT, in the vernacular buildings refurbishment these walls are no longer considered to fulfil the structural function, and they are relegated only as envelopes, thus introducing new structures that ensure the structural function by means of the validation of mathematical models predictive of future behaviours.

Figure 2: Ordinary Masonry Walls

5.3 Use of local wood species.

There are a large number of different species of wood in the world, around 30,000, but from these only 2,000 are commercial. Around 150 species are marketed in Spain, of which only a few have been determined for their structural classification.

The traditional nearby trees in Baix Empordà, white and black poplars, are no longer used in construction. Spanish regulations consider black poplar unsuitable for structural use, and it is not currently used in the beams of the top slabs of buildings. Therefore, it is very difficult to build using local woods [31]. The commercially supplied wood comes from the wetlands of Northern Europe, which are better adapted to existing technology for efficient cutting. In this sense, the best option is to purchase laminated wood – that is, wood cut into small pieces of homogeneous length and joined with resins. They cite its higher reliability as the reason for its use, since architects are indeed constituted through the effects of social forces, this does not preclude them from intervening creatively to transform social structures (cf. [32]). They also believe that the possibility of suffering pathologies caused by hygroscopic movements, and the risk of suffering biotic attacks are substantially lower.

It is mainly the predictability factor promoted by the OCTs that makes this type of wood more favourable over local solid natural wood, with which slabs and roof structures in this region are traditionally defined. In summary, what lies behind this preference is the legitimacy achieved as objectifiers of chance, and this implies an ability to reject and dissolve "traditional" alternatives [33].

Although OCTs must limit their functions to controlling and giving their opinion on the ideology of the solutions adopted and their execution, OCT for audit does eventually force changes in building systems practices [33]. These effects end up to be systematically documented and fed back into the design process, because audits do not operate neutrally, and end up having effects on the audited. Structuring and shaping the field of possible action of architects and technicians ends up without apparently any force modulating the "autonomous" individual's capacity for self-control. Eventually, architects and technicians change themselves the traditional vernacular construction systems to be accepted by OCT.

4. CONCLUSION

Decennial insurance issued by OCT is the main governmental technology. This system has led to help the dismantling of traditional forms of construction. OCT is the dispositive of precautionary risk that destabilizes and reshapes the basis of vernacular construction systems, since the risk-security complex empowers managerial technology to act. Generally, liberty and security are viewed as a forming a zero-sum game, so measures of security may occasion a reduction of technician's individual liberty (c.f. [25]) since there is a close relationship between risk rationalities and 'targeted governance' [34].

Quality assurance programmes require establishing objectives, design performance, measures to reflect those objectives. Therefore, any possible breach involving use of vernacular systems construction involves two risks. On the one hand, a high economic cost that must be borne by each particular case that decides to stray from the beaten path and chooses historical local solutions. These must be justified by extraordinary trials and tests to ensure the safety and durability of the solutions in each specific case. It is important to bear in mind that neoliberal forms of governing do not take into consideration the existence of oligopolies, which compete under unequal conditions.

On the other hand, there is a cost allocated to the technician, who assumes the responsibility for not using the solutions recommended by the various different regulations. In this second case, the difficulty is even greater, since as the effectiveness of traditional techniques depends on interactions between many factors, which must be taken carefully into consideration, if the real historical successes are to be understood since vernacular architecture up to modernity, following the principle of tradition anchored to the place, both by the use of materials and building systems known in each area.

Under these conditions, even local aspects are deeply penetrated and configured by social influences that

have made them quite distant apart. Thus, modes of vernacular construction systems have been diluted, if not erased, as the neoliberal government, born out from the rational-legal system, manage to penetrate to some extent the very heart of the most local level [31]. Auditing has been introduced as an agency of change without a measured consideration of benefits and possible dysfunctional effects, since audit and related ideas of monitoring are understood uncritically behind the paradigm of security as the normal technique of government. Thus, it is argued that the use of vernacular building systems requires tailored policy.

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