WHATEVER HAPPENED TO SOCIÓPOLIS*?
Urban narratives: architecture, real estate crisis and living the unfinished

*Project for a City of the Future

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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.

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 rural 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.

PLANNED ( ) BUILT ( ) LIVED
In 2003, Sociópolis was presented at the Valencian Art Biennal under the title Sociópolis: A Social Project. Shortly after, it went from being a shelved utopian model to becoming a master plan for a large urban development project backed politially 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.

Elements of Sociópolis’ urban narratives

FINANCIALISATION
bureaucracy
municipal politics
real estate
construction industry
social housing

LOCAL STORIES
city production
research policy
peri-urban agriculture
everyday practices

THE VIEW TOWARDS THE SEA FROM ONE OF THE BUILDINGS OF SOCIÓPOLIS

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