



CONVERSATIONS IN PLANNING THEORY AND PRACTICE BOOKLET PROJECT

IN THE MIRROR OF URBAN LANDSCAPES: SHARING EXPERIENCES AND GROUNDING

JUAN LUIS DE LAS RIVAS, IN CONVERSATION WITH ANA RUIZ-VARONA
AND FEDERICO CAMERIN



Master Plan for the "City of Youth" new urban development in Ponferrada (León, Spain). Source: Juan Luis de las Rivas & Planz SLP, 2006



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Conversations in Planning

Booklet 11

Juan Luis de las Rivas, Ana Ruiz-Varona and Federico Camerin

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Foreword by Mario Paris

The ‘Conversations-in-Planning’ YA-AESOP booklet series is a Young Academics (YA) initiative to document conversations between scholars about relevant theories, ideas, concepts and practices in the field of spatial planning. The booklet series aims to provide an interactive platform for YAs to develop their academic and intellectual skills through their involvement in the production and publication of these series. As I think this is an intriguing tool for the intergenerational exchange of knowledge and experiences, I first developed a booklet in 2019 as an author (with Prof. Alessandro Balducci). Since 2022, I have been a member of the Editorial Board of this series of booklets. The present issue, following this consolidated tradition, includes a dialogue among a senior profile—Prof. Juan Luis de las Rivas—and two academics, Ana Ruiz-Varona and Federico Camerin. Therefore, for my colleagues and I on the board, it represents a new opportunity to continue the work that started in 2013. Furthermore, for the authors, this is a triple challenge connected to the processes of sharing knowledge and contributing to scientific dialogue.

The first challenge refers to the content produced by the dialogue, which is the basis of the booklet. In this case, we are far from a hagiographic effort, and the interaction among the authors is horizontal and planar, mainly focused on discussing topics and concepts rather than celebrating a figure. Therefore, in this booklet, the reference to the work and profile of Prof. de las Rivas serves as a witness to a long trajectory in which our protagonist moves between research, practice and teaching—mixing all of them in one continuous interaction. This privileged position allows the authors to observe how an academic with a refined and consolidated background in planning and architecture culture defines his perspective throughout the years based on his voracious readings, thereby situating himself in the national and international academic discourse but never forgetting his roots and the conditions in which he has worked and passed for.

Throughout the pages of this book, the exchanges between Federico, Ana and Prof. de las Rivas show how planners must be conscious of the context in which they work, move and live, producing a personal approach to the different topics and problems arising from the practice and the dialogues with students and public bodies. The large succession of plans, projects and writings quoted within the pages also shows how evolved a specific identity is within the planning discourse, marked by a precise and evident position. Through the answers proposed by Prof. de las Rivas, there is a remark on how a committed and identified perspective can be relevant within the academic debate and have a considerable impact on the context in which he works, especially in ways that are also relevant and useful to the broader scientific community. This lateral—I won’t use the term ‘peripheral’—point of view is a peculiar feature of Prof. de las Rivas’ profile and, for several reasons, one of the common grounds shared by the authors. How can we exceed the potential insignificance when we work in a medium city within a low-density rural region, dealing with problems and issues amidst the current urban planning debate? From the dialogue emerges a double solution. On the one hand, even on a different scale, Valladolid and Castilla y León share more than they expected with other large European cities. On the other hand, those issues that are currently important in the planning discourse (the quality of urban fabric and the public spaces, the role of nature in the city, the proximity and its impact on everyday life and the use of landscape as a tool) can be tackled and tested with a manageable effort in a medium city, enabling us to compare lessons learned with those produced in other contexts by different colleagues.

Thus, considering this aspect, the role of Ana and Federico emerged throughout the development of the booklet. While they encountered Prof. de las Rivas during their respective careers, they never worked directly with him. When they answered the call for authors (January 2023), they showed a certain enthusiasm about the idea of exchanging knowledge with one of the most relevant Spanish planners. At the same time, among the editorial board, we did not want to give up involving them either. Therefore, we proposed to work together, taking advantage of their different sensitivities, interests and trajectories. They had to collaborate and stimulate each other for months, systematising their work, questions and specific concerns. Together, they covered a large set of research fields and interests that matched those of Juan Luis. It was amazing to see how their interactions gradually flourished, shifting from a set of classic interviews to a three-way dialogue.

The second challenge faced by the authors—the selection of a pattern for the booklet—is deeply connected to the first one. The final structure should be able to describe the complexity of a profile straddling academia and professional practice—one that has always been developed within the university and its research structures. The result is a complex product that collects different materials, allowing readers to peruse this work in different, non-linear ways. Together with a biographical focus, the booklet faces a set of discourses about planning studies and the relationship between planning and academia. Firstly, there is an attempt to situate the discourse within the larger context of the planning discipline in Spain and Southern Europe, not discarding several links with the U.S. and Latin-American debates. There are sections in this volume that belong to this transversal approach, such as the reflection about the tensions between plan and project, the space as a place or the approach to ecological planning, which the readers can find upon reading the text. Moreover, the authors not only discuss the role of planners within the schools of architecture but also how students react when they deal with the urban/regional scales and the stimuli connected with planning fields. In this light, within the words of Prof. de las Rivas, there is a passionate reflection about the relevance of the role of planners with a background in architecture and urban design in current debates. Based on his perspective, the ability to read and manage space remains an important task that competes with this kind of planner. This task we cannot forget, as we must abstract from the materiality of the city and the landscape in which we live and operate. Another interesting perspective of the booklet is the continuous reference to the bridge that joins research and practice. Since the first experiences, Prof. de las Rivas developed a parallel interest in the involvement of ideas and concepts in the interpretation and design of real cases using the city and its close environment as a testing ground. All of these perspectives appear within the booklet, and readers can move within the pages that focus on these themes.

Together with these transversal issues emerging from the dialogue, the booklet contains a set of essays and texts developed by the authors, in which they frame the argumentations in the disciplinary context or connect the reflections proposed by Juan Luis to the general debates in the urban planning/urban studies discourse. To lend support to the ongoing narrative, there is an articulated collection of images that accompany the text. These comprise a synthetic atlas of sketches drawn by Juan Luis, which are projects and plans produced together with the research team of the IUU_Lab and some covers of his books and diagrams. The authors included those materials not as decorative additions but to demonstrate how the work of Prof. de las Rivas utilises representation by maps, schemes and charts as a key tool to reflect about spaces and places. The authors also use these as devices to

share and communicate with experts, technicians, academics and the general public, in accordance with the different occasions and opportunities. Finally, the booklet contains a collection of boxes featuring different voices of individuals who have worked with Prof. de las Rivas over the decades. Often, these serve as highlights for additional potential hints that may not have been included in the booklet but otherwise help the readers understand the complexity of the protagonist's profile.

Altogether, these materials shape a complex product; while they are synthetic, they are not simplistic or self-celebrating. The booklet is a solid contribution that, starting from the figure of Prof. de las Rivas, comprehends a set of scientific components in a non-banal format. This option successfully represents all his roles and activities, as well as the different languages, registers and tones involved, which are also examples of the capacity of Juan Luis to move among scales, disciplines and interlocutors throughout his academic and professional paths.

The third challenge of the booklet is how to frame the relevance and the role of the works of Prof. de las Rivas in the international debate. Despite his rich and structured network of collaborations with foreign universities and institutions, the majority of his activities (plans, projects and programmes) are situated in his region. The background of all the discussion can be found within Castilla y León, its cities, its rural areas with small but resilient towns and its agricultural and human landscape. This low-density region marked by corridors and axes where the urban dynamics are more intense is the principal—but not the only—research and work field within the booklet. Therefore, we read about an academic who knows, plans and designs within this area; works with civil servants and local and regional administrations; and tackles relevant issues with experts and the inhabitants. At the same time, we discover the important role played by the work of Prof. de las Rivas in disseminating what he has learned and tested within this context through his impressive national and international networks. In my opinion, this link between the space of action and the reflections of a discussant in the booklet, along with its personal and disciplinary development, is another most interesting aspect of this text. At the same time, the capacity to go back and forth between a specific context and general questions and problems is the reason why this booklet (and the work of Prof. de las Rivas) is anchored to the local context but not necessarily localist.

Thus, in their narration, Federico and Ana developed an actual 'translation' of the real meaning of this action. According to Latin etymology, for the majority in Spanish, they made the efforts of *trans and ducere* in the work of Juan Luis. They not only crossed the linguistic boundaries of his production that, by the way, is already an important operation in which they placed the writings and their professional outputs in the disciplinary context, making them palatable for a non-Spanish public. Federico and Ana aimed to 'lead beyond' their production to international academics, situating them in the specific temporal and cultural contexts where they were developed. Therefore, the booklet required important work to find an encounter point in the first chapters, where they established a common ground—and a common language—that serve as the base of the final part in which the dialogue is more open and oriented towards the future. Month after month, I saw them becoming involved in this unwritten but evident struggle in the booklet, and for this, I had to thank them.

In my opinion, the final result of the authors' efforts is a strong contribution to academic dialogue and the advancement of knowledge in planning theory and practice. As in other booklets, we can

gather several lessons learned from the experiences of one of the most important Spanish planners, which we can then use to reflect on the future of our discipline. Prof. Juan Luis de las Rivas is an experienced educator in the field of planning and urban design. Many of his disciples nowadays are lecturers and academics, while others are civil servants and local/regional administrators. Therefore, once again, he took the opportunity to teach us something, not by giving us abstract theories, but by doing and thinking about what he did, thus keeping a strong link between reflections and actions.

Video 1:

Making of J.L. de las Rivas, in conversation with A. Ruiz Varona and F. Camerin

<https://youtu.be/YF89D9MQCrg>



AESOP YA Conversations in the Planning Booklet Series

Juan Luis de las Rivas, Ana Ruiz-Varona and Federico Camerin

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Juan Luis de las Rivas Sanz is Full Professor of Urban Planning and Design and Director of the School of Architecture at the University of Valladolid (Spain). He frequently collaborates with regional and local authorities as a planning consultant and currently leads the IUU_Lab, a research group specializing in spatial planning and urban design. The group has carried out projects for various cities and urban regions—including Burgos, Ponferrada, and Zamora—as well as for several Spanish autonomous communities such as Castilla y León, Asturias, and Extremadura. Additionally, IUU_Lab has been involved in initiatives commissioned by Spanish ministries and regional governments, with a focus on innovation in sustainable urban and regional planning.

Professor de las Rivas is the author or co-author of over ten monographs in the fields of regional planning, urban design, and architecture. He is also the Spanish translator of Ian McHarg's seminal work *Design with Nature* (Barcelona, 2000). He has served as a visiting professor at numerous universities across Europe, the United States, and Latin America, participating in undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral programs.

His research explores the interplay between nature and urban design, grounded in the architectural foundations of planning. In 2002, his project *Directrices de Ordenación Territorial de Valladolid y Entorno*—urban guidelines for the metropolitan area—received the Fourth European Urban and Regional Planning Award from the European Council of Town Planners (ECTP). Another of his projects, involving the regeneration of two postwar neighborhoods, received an honorable mention in the 2003 Gubbio International Prize.

This booklet emerges from a series of discussions held over the past two years between the authors and Professor de las Rivas. At the early stages of their academic careers, the authors had the opportunity to engage with him on critical topics such as the dialectic between place and landscape, the contradictions inherent in planning practices and urban culture, and the renewed vision of urban planning as a creative and interpretive discipline.

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