

Unexpected beauty in urban decay

Jonna Tolonen
University of Lapland

The barrio, or 'neighbourhood', of El Cabanyal in Valencia, Spain, is a historic fishing quarter from the 13th century next to the Mediterranean coast. El Cabanyal, with its colourful art nouveau houses, is an officially protected historical zone – but in recent decades it has suffered an absolute abandonment of public investment, leading to deep degradation in its streets. Due to a history of irregularities with running water and rubbish collection, an absence of social services and restoration projects, and a growing number of drug-related crimes, many residents have moved away from the area. The streets are now full of abandoned houses: doorways are sealed with cement or bricks, building facades have deteriorated, and the walls are used as canvases for graffiti and street art.

However, El Cabanyal is now experiencing a process of gentrification. In line with Sorando and Ardura's (2016) characterisation of the stages of gentrification, El Cabanyal has already gone through an abandonment stage. It is now embarking on an era of regeneration, in which a series of public interventions contribute to redefining the area, and the neighbourhood's image begins to change. Since the City of Valencia commenced a major restoration of the houses, parks and streets, and private real estate developers have moved in, the social character of El Cabanyal has started to change. New people – both tourists and locals – are now exploring the area.

Unexpected beauty in urban decay is an ongoing photo series that seeks to explore Spanish neighbourhoods that are being altered or demolished to make way for urban development. The images show the last moments of these places before they are transformed through the process of gentrification.



Figure 1. Due to hardly any formal traffic management in the area, traffic signs are a rare sight in El Cabanyal.



Figure 2. The narrow streets are perfect places to practice artistic skills.



Figure 3. El Cabanyal is home to about 20,000 people living in 12,000 houses (Ayuntamiento de València, 2017). In recent decades, about 4,000 inhabitants have left the area (Navarro Castelló, 2017), leaving behind houses that look like this: one entrance is closed with cement; the other with locks.



Figure 4. Violencia es trabajar sin contrato. 'Working without a contract is violence.'



Figure 5. Abandoned house. The window is sealed with bricks from the inside. On the wall, someone has written: *Te amo*, 'I love you', in white paint. Sixty percent of the houses in the area are over 50 years old, and during the last twenty years around 200 houses have been demolished (Hervás Más, 2017).



Figure 6. The owner has blocked the doors, windows and air vents with heavy layers of cement.



Figure 7. Vaguely buffed penis.



Figure 8. Cat siesta. Resulting from inefficient rubbish collections, some parts of the streets have been turned into DIY rubbish points.



Figure 9. *DECAY REAL ESTATE* by Valencian artist *Are You Dead?*, who has been painting since 2013 and is 'obsessed with decay' (Pardo, 2014).



Figure 10. There seems to be no easy resolution to the prolonged urban and social crisis in El Cabanyal. Faustino Villora, the spokesman for the association *Salvem El Cabanyal*, 'Save El Cabanyal', has said: 'There are families who have resisted the harassment of the previous municipal government for 18 years and now, following the hope that a new government brought, when they thought the solution was here, they find that life in their neighbourhood is getting even worse' (Vázquez, 2017).



Figure 11. Graffiti in a beam of a shadow. Artist unknown.

Jonna Tolonen is a photographer and a postdoctoral researcher at the Faculty of Art and Design at the University of Lapland, Finland. Her works examine the intersections of street, politics and society. Jonna's favourite neighbourhoods to photograph are El Cabanyal in Valencia, Lavapiés in Madrid, and La Isleta in Las Palmas.

Notes

- 1 All photographs taken by the author in El Cabanyal, Valencia, Spain in 2016 and 2017.
- 2 Spanish-English translations by the author.

References

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