

URBAN RENEWAL, INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE AND TOURISM: A PROCESS WITH SOME SUCCESS IN AVILÉS IN ASTURIAS¹

Paz Benito del Pozo

Department of de Geography and Geology. University of Leon
paz.benito@unileon.es

The Avilés estuary lies in the central area of Asturias and within the largely urban zone defined by the three largest cities in the region, Oviedo, Gijón and Avilés. It became industrialized over the course of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century on the lines typical of the first industrial revolution. This was a slow process, with a limited regional scope and with territorial impacts concentrated on green-field sites whose greatest advantage was their location near a port. However, economic policies under Franco were to favour the development of an authentic industrial complex from the 1950s onwards, resulting in a considerable concentration on both shores of the estuary of large State and private enterprises involved in iron- and steel-making, non-ferrous metals, and heavy industry in general. These came to augment the incipient industrial area that had earlier built up around the activities of the *Real Compañía Asturiana de Minas*, the first major concern on the estuary, undertaking mining and metal-working from the mid nineteenth century. This Belgian-owned firm was followed by other smaller companies with more limited outputs, which were nonetheless crucial to enhancing the industrial foundations of the zone. The setting up of *Ensidesa* was the end-point of a process of industrialization which brought with it a radical transformation of the estuary and of the town of Avilés itself, which experienced explosive population growth and acquired the layout and functions typical of a company town of the pattern associated with scientifically managed mass production.

Changes in international markets, along with advances in technology and methods of production affected Spanish industry in the period between 1980 and 1999, having a negative impact on industry in Avilés, which was obsolete and specialized in mature sectors. It fell into decline and underwent the symptoms of de-industrialization with similar effects to those seen in other Spanish and European cities, caught in a downward spiral of territorial decline. Attempts were made to break out of this from the late 1990s onwards through policies of diversification of production and of urban renewal which were long-term and not always successful. Along with industrial decline there was also an urban crisis in Avilés, involving

among other problems high unemployment rates, de-capitalization of the town's economy, the abandonment of factories and workshops, environmental deterioration and the appearance of waste industrial sites. These were difficulties for which town planning and urban development strategies should find solutions, but the re-industrialization policies attempted from the mid 1980s onwards through the 1990s revealed their limitations for encouraging growth and creating opportunities.

This paper uses a qualitative method combined with certain quantitative techniques to analyse the transformations in functions and landscape in Avilés that followed the crisis and dismantling of its most emblematic and powerful enterprise, *Ensidesa*. At the current time, one part of the land released by this company provides a basis and a context for new uses that extend what Avilés can offer by way of cultural tourism. It also has given a new meaning to the industrial landscape of the estuary, which mixes harbour installations, former factories, renovated factories, footpaths and green areas, industrial avenues, abandoned industrial facilities and modern avant-garde buildings that look out over the city and the sea, building up a landscape with great potential for tourism. The interest here lies in those elements making up this new landscape and the influence they may have in the tourist function that Avilés and its environs are trying to reinforce by stressing their industrial legacy.

Of the set of actions envisaged by the local authorities for renewal of the estuary on the basis of its heritage of iron and steel, and its linkages with the development of tourism and the town, one project must be picked out which has had the greatest social and media impact. This is the *Oscar Niemeyer International Cultural Centre*, situated next to the San Agustín docks, in the area where the former *Ensidesa* quays stood. The proposal represented a major stimulus for the city, since it not merely changed land uses and the inherited landscape, but also brought with it a hitherto unknown cultural function and an unprecedented heightening of profile in the outside world. The project was born under the aegis of the Prince of Asturias Foundation, which in 2005 was offered the idea by the Brazilian architect Óscar Niemeyer and which thereafter facilitated relationships between him and the Regional Government of the Principality of Asturias, contacts which culminated in an agreement signed in March 2006 to locate the cultural centre in Avilés. The work, the Brazilian's sole project in Spain, cost more than 40 million euro and was completed between 2008 and 2011. On 25 March 2011 there was an inauguration for this new cultural nexus comprising five buildings: the Auditorium, the Dome, the sight-seeing Tower, the Multi-Purpose Building and the Open Square, exercising a notable "magnet effect" on visitors from Spain and abroad. However, what should have been the key resource in enhancing the profile of Avilés as a tourist destination (a sort of second Guggenheim in the north of the country) faced money difficulties in 2012 because of conflicts about financial management and policy. These involved the Foundation responsible for the Centre, the Government of the Principality of Asturias and the Avilés City Council. These problems in practical terms led to a downscaling of activities and publicity campaigns and severe financial cut-backs.

The tourist function of Avilés is highlighted and planned on a scale greater than that of the city and the municipality. This is because of the small size of the municipality of Avilés and the spreading out in the past of some of its major functions into neighbouring municipalities. Together with them it forms a relatively homogeneous territory which is sufficiently cohesive to be able to share policies and strategic actions requiring a regional scale to ensure

success. Data on how tourism has evolved in Avilés point to the growing role of this activity, especially since 2004, when publicity measures agreed by the Avilés City Council and the Consortium of Councils of neighbouring towns were adopted. These applied a strategy on many fronts: new resources for tourism, improvements and expansion in the range of shops and hotels, enhancements to the environmental quality of the estuary and its surroundings, and campaigns in the usual publicity channels for tourism. Table 2 reflects the steady growth in visitor numbers, going from 24,145 in 2004 to 59,006 in 2011, although they did fall back to the level of 2010 in 2012, starting to recover again in 2013. The striking hike in visits in 2011 was related to the inauguration of the Niemeyer Cultural Centre and the resources mobilized for that event within and outside Asturias, including countries in the European Community. That year a total of 59,006 visitors passed through the Avilés Tourist Office, in other words 25,691 more than the previous year, representing an increase of 43.4%, unprecedented in tourism in this region.

In this process of expansion in tourism a major part is played by visitors coming from other Autonomous Regions, in other words tourism from within Spain. These went from 13,516 visitors in 2007 to 34,174 in 2011 and 19,270 in 2013, thanks to the previously noted *Niemeyer effect*. As to the specific origins of these tourists, one place stands out: Madrid. This is followed by other regions in the north of the country: Catalonia, Castile and Leon, and the Basque Country. There are also visitors from Andalusia and in smaller numbers from the Community of Valencia and from Galicia. When the spotlight is shone on visitors from outside Spain, the data show that they far less numerous, although figures for them have gone up from year to year. Thus, while in 2007 there were 1,476 who chose Avilés as a destination, in 2013 the numbers rose to 2,720, with once again an exception for 2011, which drew no fewer than 3,028 international visitors. This was evidence of the impact of the publicity campaign for the Niemeyer Centre on the occasion of its inauguration and the impulse that this resource constituted for tourist activity in Avilés, with a sudden fall in the following year because of the institutional crisis commented upon above and still awaiting resolution.

The conclusions for this paper may be summed up as the following: Avilés and its estuary are a clear example of the radical transformation of an area which for decades had been subject to the logic and impacts of industrialism, leading to a company town with a profile of contamination and an economy that was a monoculture of iron and steel. As has been shown, without turning its back on its industrial past Avilés has proved capable of regenerating its industrial fabric after the closure of its flagship enterprise, of creating an image as a zone of cleanliness and well-being, of redefining its town planning, and of finding a niche for itself as a tourist destination with its own identity. This experience reflects similar instances in other parts of the north of Spain, drawing inspiration from models like the *Bilbao-Ría 2000* company. Its success is due to a strategy in urban policy laying stress on taking advantage of abandoned industrial sites, of environmental decontamination, of regeneration of the port, and of improvements in the town's historical centre. It also emphasizes a tourism policy at a level higher than a single municipality based on collaboration between various local town corporations in the environs of Avilés in order to reach a size of tourist area that is more competitive and diversified through the pooling of resources and infrastructures, being able to offer a range of varied and unusual elements, among which pride of place goes to the Niemeyer Cultural Centre and the industrial landscape in which it stands. Consideration of the

results of the set of actions and interventions undertaken indicates that there has been growth in tourism in the area and that the city and estuary have enhanced their attraction for tourists. Nevertheless, there are some dark clouds on the horizon of this process: the problems of management and finances that ever since 2012 have been trammelling the aims of those responsible for the Niemeyer Cultural Centre and have prevented Avilés from consolidating itself as an international destination, an aspiration that in 2006 seemed more than plausible. At the present moment horizons are more modest, but the great change is now a reality and Avilés has built a profile as a model of success in transforming old industrial cities, capable of revitalizing themselves and generating alternative activities with a capacity to propel growth and new well-being for their citizens.