

Land and freedom:

Low-impact building in the “other” Spain

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The tsunami of construction that washed over Spain in the decade of the 2000s has drawn back, leaving behind some very odd jetsam. Unused airports, white elephant projects like the City of the Arts and Sciences in Valencia, uninhabited housing developments in the middle of nowhere – and massive debts, public and private.

But nearly all that concrete has been poured into a few places: around the main cities, the Mediterranean coast and islands. There's another Spain where nothing much has happened – and it just goes on happening, decade after decade.

Half of Spain's 47 million people live in towns and cities occupying just 2% of its surface area. Meanwhile there are over 3,200 rural municipalities, covering 40% of the country, with fewer than 10 residents per square kilometre. That's less than a million people, in a combined area the size of England and Scotland. These depopulated areas are found all over Spain, but mostly in the interior north. They include two-thirds of the territory of Castilla y León and Aragón, more than half of La Rioja and Castilla La Mancha, and over a third of Cantabria, Extremadura, Navarra and even wealthy Cataluña.¹

Once off the main roads, you find these silent villages everywhere: ruined adobe houses, empty fields, storks' nests, baking sun and biting wind. Most have been dying since the 1950s and '60s, when rural poverty drove mass emigration to the cities. A few old people still hang on, growing their cabbages and leeks. Harsh climates are often exacerbated by a lack of trees.



However, a growing neo-ruralist movement is repopulating this “other” Spain. Well-known ecovillage projects like Lakabe, Matavenero or Amayuelas are only the tip of the

iceberg. Thousands of mostly young people, both from Spanish cities and elsewhere in Europe, have decided to shun “the system,” buy or occupy cheap rural land and make a simpler life. It's impossible to know exactly how many neo-rurals there are in Spain, because their activities – especially their buildings – are often under-the-radar. While it's perfectly legal to build a hideous concrete chalet almost anywhere, getting permission for a lovingly crafted cob, adobe or straw-bale structure is often impossible and always expensive. Mark, an English straw-bale builder and instructor who has worked all over Spain, points out that while you can build a basic straw-bale dwelling of 40m² for as little as €2000 in materials, planning permission will set you back around €6000 – if you can get it, which is very unlikely. The zoning system, meanwhile, means that the cost of “urban” land for building can be five times that of rural land.

But in Spain, there is a middle way between “legal” and “illegal” – call it “alegal” – where interesting things often happen. A building might not be technically legal, but unless someone complains there's no legal case against the owner. People often build first and legalise (or not) their buildings later, based on a variety of circumstances, like proximity to a village, pre-existence of a ruined cabin, or the building's use as a barn, toolshed or the like.

My own experience as an eco-builder is based in a tiny, but not especially remote, village in Cantabria, less than an hour from Bilbao. My family and I started with a cob cabin, legally classified as a 15m² toolshed permitted as part of a legal building project (though we later expanded it to about 40m²). We lived there for the better part of 4 years while we built a two-storey, 220m² hybrid cob/straw bale house. The whole project (“urban” land included) has set us back about €155,000 – a lot for an eco-build project, but roughly a third of the typical cost per square metre for a conventional house in our region. The main house has architects' plans signed off by the regional college of architects, but which say nothing about the materials used. We didn't follow the plans, anyway, because we were learning as we went along. We have flush toilets that go to a dual composting chamber instead of a septic tank – I don't even want to know if that's legal or not. Oh, and we also do home education – another activity that's alegal in Spain, but which thousands of families practice.



Local officials and residents in general tend to favour any new activity that promises benefits to the area. We've become fairly well known for our “casa de barro” through word-of-mouth and TV appearances, and the mayor is supportive of our new project to build two more (permitted) cob houses in the same village.

Our situation is unusual, in that most low-impact builders in Spain don't seek formal permission. In the case of our friends Carlos and Maria, their local town hall (also in Cantabria) actually ceded them a plot of land on which to build an (alegal) straw bale house with the proviso that if they are denounced, the municipality won't defend them. Our neighbours Sergio and Sandra, meanwhile, are building a cob cottage which they hope to legalise later, either formally or by default after a certain period. Another couple we know have built a 40m² straw bale cabin for €5000, also without permission. For all these couples, the risk is worth the benefit of a far cheaper, better and more sustainable house than could be built legally.



But going “underground” has its drawbacks. We couldn't have built our house without the help of publicity to attract volunteers. Also, one of the biggest problems with the neo-rural lifestyle is isolation. It's much less stressful if you don't have to hide, and far more fun if you have company.

I think that the “other” Spain is crying out for a network of well-designed, albeit technically alegal, ecovillage projects. A group with a critical mass of potential residents and a viable economic model based around natural building (especially straw bale, which is both an abundant wasted resource and appropriate to the climate), agroforestry, renewable energy, crafts, leisure, experiential education, and so on should be able to gain local support and buy or lease land very cheaply or even for free. Regional officials would find it more in their interest to legalise the buildings or at least turn a blind eye, than spend tens of thousands in legal fees to demolish €5000 eco-houses. If you want to help make this idea a reality, then please get in touch!

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- 1 Municipal statistics for 2012, from the Spanish National Institute of Statistics, <http://www.ine.es>. Spain has 8,114 municipalities in all, with an average area of 62 km². The national average population density is 93 people per km². The definition of a “depopulated” municipality as one with 10 or fewer residents per km² is my own.