

Article

Culture as a Resilient and Sustainable Strategy in Small Cities

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Abstract: This article studies the recent evolution of five cases of small cities in the interior of Spain that several decades ago invested in culture as a strategy to maintain their populations and increase the quality of life of their inhabitants. These are case studies of differentiated characteristics in which the analysis of their evolution offers important keys for developing cultural policies in any small city in the world. The examples of Allariz, Almagro, Astorga, Puigcerdá and Trujillo allow for the corroboration of how betting on culture as a resilient and sustainable strategy generates positive results for their populations. Allariz, in the province of Ourense, is showing a cultural identity development that emerged as a movement to reject the pollution of the Arnoia River. In Almagro, in the La Mancha province of Ciudad Real, the recovery in 1955 of the only Corral de Comedias preserved since the 17th century allowed for the inauguration in 1979 of the first Almagro Classical Theatre Festival, and from then on, a whole series of restorations and new constructions related to theater and the performing arts, which turned a small town of less than 10,000 inhabitants into the national theater capital. Astorga is a small two-thousand-year-old city in the province of León, which is trying to recover as a living history museum to face the current reality of demographic and economic crises. Puigcerdá, in the province of Girona, the historic capital of Cerdanya, is another small town in which cultural management and production is much larger than it would be corresponding to its demographic size. Lastly, Trujillo, in the Extremadura province of Cáceres, a city of pre-Roman origin known in the 16th century as the birthplace of conquistadors in America such as Francisco Pizarro and Francisco de Orellana, is another small town of less than 10,000 inhabitants that is committed to creating and maintaining a rich cultural agenda with an important weight for the history and relationship between America and Spain and the recovery of the civil and religious heritage of this small monumental city. These are five enclaves, in summary, that have for years followed a clear strategy of betting on identity and culture to improve the well-being of their inhabitants and the local development of their economy, and which, as this research demonstrates, have made it possible to avoid the biggest problems of the impoverishment and abandonment of other nearby towns with similar characteristics.



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1. Introduction

The global situation in the third decade of the 21st century broadly shows geopolitical tensions with multiplier effects, an interrelated global economy and a standardized culture that follows the American model of life as a basic pattern. Globalization, which began in the last decades of the twentieth century with the collapse of the communist bloc, is a system that multiplies inequalities both in developed countries, now deindustrialized and tertiarized, and in less developed countries. The changes in the settlement systems of developed countries imply the transition from spaces of production to spaces of consumption and the generation of services. It is a model that especially benefits large metropolitan areas, to the detriment of small- and medium-sized cities and rural areas, in a process of loss of functions, inhabitants and activities that public administrations in all countries try to stop with strategic plans and measures to promote sustainability and local development.

At the end of the 20th century, local development was a discourse that offered communities that were not part of the global system of central nodes a formula to encourage the accumulation of capital in their territory [1]. The aim was to foster the capacities of entrepreneurship and local labor to implement endogenous development based on their own resources. The theory was argued that if a local productive system was generated, positive synergies would be initiated between all actors in the local socioeconomic fabric [2], significantly increasing the levels of development. In Spain, local development was the theoretical basis of a multitude of strategic plans [3,4] of small- and medium-sized cities, rural districts and autonomous communities that sought with their own resources the basis of socioeconomic development [5], or at least endogenous growth, more sustainability and less absolute dependence on global capitalism. However, the globalization of the economy has generated, at the current stage, a single, interrelated system in which local potential resources are not a capital factor for development, as opposed to other conditioning factors such as international capital flows, global divisions of labor, wage costs, economies of scale or national fiscal policies [6].

Contrary to what was advocated by the discourse on local development and its implementation through strategic plans and urban marketing, since the 1980s, what have predominated in most small- and medium-sized cities in rich countries have been processes of deindustrialization and the loss of inhabitants [7]. These are part of a demographic and functional contraction that is a consequence of long-lasting negative dynamics that have little to do with local characteristics and more to do with processes of structural change caused by neoliberal globalization.

In this difficult context, the promotion of culture as a different development strategy has arisen in some localities. This entails a culture that includes both knowledge about the characteristics of the place itself, its local identity [8] and the active enjoyment of free time. This is freed from competitive stress by adapting a slow way of life that allows for contemplating exhibitions, attending plays, musical concerts or dance performances, visiting museums, and participating in popular festivals or reading clubs [9]. Being able to invest time (and money) enjoying the performing, visual or literary arts is not within the reach of everyone, although we find ourselves, as the philosopher P. F. Drucker explained [10], in a knowledge society. Therefore, a determined, ideological and plural commitment to culture from public and private organizations is necessary.

The relationship between culture and territorial development was already analyzed by Christopher Ray in 1998 [11], who introduced the concept of “culture economy” to refer to the possible revaluation of a rural space based on concrete actions on some attributes (“markers”) of its cultural identity: traditional food, language, craft, folklore, theater, visual art, or historical and architectural heritage. Olga Lucía Molano [12] emphasizes this relationship between culture and territorial development, for which the development of a territory involves collective action, which implies the generation of numerous programs and strategies that can have a cultural basis through popular recognition and appropriation of historical memory. In her study on small French towns and the importance of promoting culture by local councils, Mariette Sibertin-Blanc [13] argued that cultural policies occupy an important place in their territorial development strategies. Horacio Capel [14] also emphasized the importance of the cultural heritage of small towns, to strengthen local identity and the pride of citizens, but also to develop innovative economic activities.

The research presented in this contribution has, therefore, as its theoretical foundation the critique of traditional models of local development, implemented through strategic planning and urban marketing, in contrast to as the model of grassroots community projects, actions aimed at favoring bottom-up, participatory processes, in which the efforts of many enable regressive tendencies to be reversed and become examples of good practice. Numerous social, environmental and cultural initiatives are promoted in these localities, proposed by politicians, associations or individuals, successful or not, but which show that the most important way to avoid being a periphery is to become, autonomously and consciously, their own center of the world. This research aims to answer the following question: is the

public promotion of culture a resilient and sustainable strategy to improve the well-being of the population of small cities? This case study carried out in five Spanish towns of less than 10,000 inhabitants shows how betting on local identity and the promotion of cultural industries can be a valid method for improving the quality of life of their inhabitants.

2. Materials and Methods

This article was carried out following the inductive case study method and the desk research model. The objective of the researchers was to draw general conclusions from the direct observation of reality, the analysis of scientific publications about the villages analyzed and the study of public statistical data. Using the case study methodology allowed us to understand a specific phenomenon, in this case, the relationship between culture, well-being and development in small cities, with the intention of extrapolating partial conclusions to other possible places with similar characteristics.

The choice of the five towns took into account the previous research carried out by the authors and their specific knowledge. The intention was not to study five small towns chosen at random and analyze whether these villages promoted the development of identity and cultural industries, but to study the specific case of five localities that for many years have stood out precisely for developing this strategy as a community project. The starting hypothesis is that the commitment to strengthen local identity and the promotion of cultural activities is a key element in improving the quality of life of the inhabitants, which in turn has a direct impact on the general development of these localities. The public welfare achieved by these small towns favors the development of personal projects that would otherwise choose other places to settle. They are small cities capable of attracting new inhabitants who choose these towns precisely because of this way of planning their daily agenda, with a fundamental weight of culture and good living, in an urban context, where all other basic needs are covered (Figure 1).

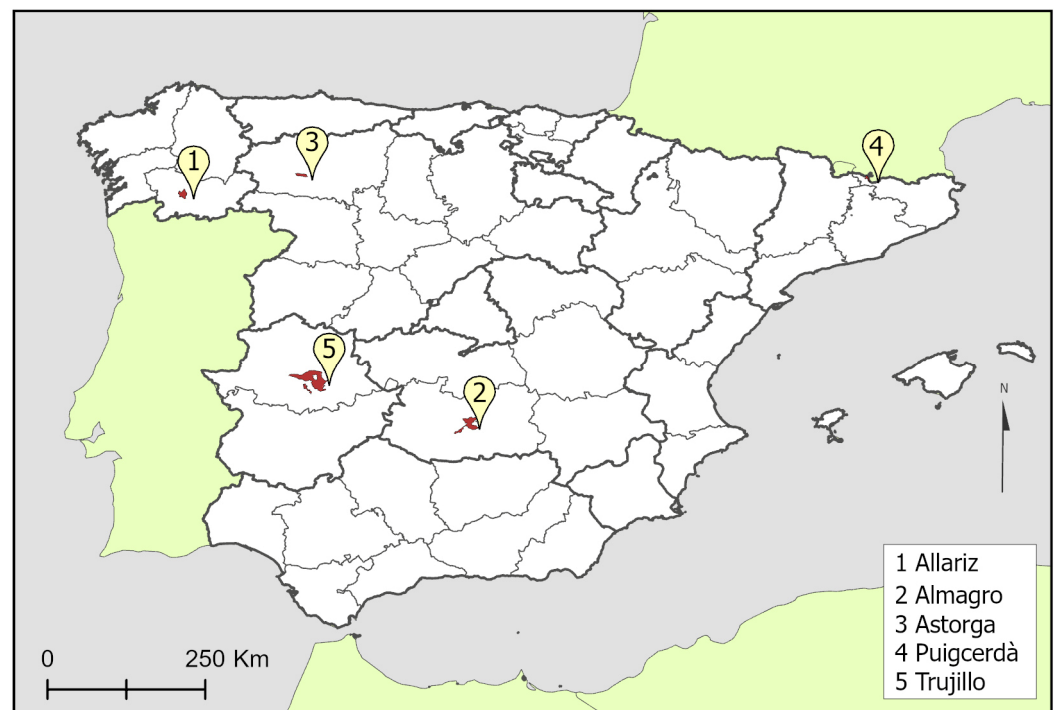


Figure 1. Location on the map of Spain of the localities studied (Source: authors).

This article presents five case studies where culture is an essential part of quality of life. The aim of this paper is to describe, explain and analyze the recent evolution of Allariz, Almagro, Astorga, Puigcerdà and Trujillo as possible examples of the planning and management of a type of small urban nucleus in which the way of life prevails over the

standard of living. For this purpose, the demographic data of recent decades, income levels, degrees of associationism, urban planning and sense of place of their inhabitants, reflected in the everyday life of each of these small towns, were analyzed. The statistics chosen for the analysis were sought to reveal situations that contradicted the normal negative evolution of these indicators in similar nuclei. The intention of the authors was to identify, through the analysis of these five examples, which aspects of the sociocultural life of these towns made a difference with respect to other localities with similar geographical characteristics that did not present these connotations of cultural activism.

3. Case Studies

3.1. Allariz

Located 23 km south of the city of Ourense, this small village has its roots in the pre-Roman era. Its location has certain physical characteristics that marked its medieval past: on the one hand, the presence of a granite elevation of the Castelo that dominated the valley and, on the other hand, the course of the river Arnoia. It was during this historical period when it had its splendor as a fortified village, had a Jewish quarter (in the current neighborhood of Socastelo) and its economy was based on activities directly related to the river: mills, tanneries and weaving workshops, mainly. This past can still be seen in the street and the numerous buildings that make up a historic quarter that was declared a Cultural Interest Site in 1971. The recent history of this small town of Ourense has marked in its calendar the summer of 1989, the year in which there was a neighborhood conflict with the municipal government motivated by the serious deterioration of the river and its historical and artistic heritage. From that year until today, the situation of this small city has undergone a radical change under an uninterrupted government of the Galician Nationalist Bloc (BNG)—more than 30 years of continuity of a project with its particular ways of doing, understanding and practicing politics at the service of society.

At the end of the 1980s, there were many residents of the nearby city of Ourense who had this city as a place of second residence, a circumstance that would be enhanced by the opening of the Rías Baixas A-52 motorway in 1988. Ourense approaches Allariz, but at the same time, it also approaches other municipalities that until then had this small city as a shopping center and services [15]. From a demographic point of view, the population of the city has experienced remarkable growth between 2000 and the present (by almost 70%). However, the municipality continues to present a demographic reality marked by aging that is located preferably in the many parish villages, which conditions its dependency index. Even so, Allariz presents a positive renewal index due to the arrival of new residents, especially younger ones and with children, who have established their residence in this place looking for better living conditions and services [16]. All this has been achieved despite being located in one of the provinces that holds the worst demographic records of Empty Spain [17].

In 1960, Allariz had the same size as the old medieval town. In the following decades, the city emerged from this urban slump thanks to the construction of new roads in its southern limit, on whose edges were built new buildings that left the interior land dedicated to tillage. Some lands later disappeared under the concrete and asphalt of the first blocks of multi-family dwellings. These new urban extensions announced the decline of the historic center, which by the 1980s, was described as having a state as serious as the situation of the Arnoia River. The abandonment, if not ruin, of many of its buildings and the industries on its banks and the pollution of its waters were enhanced by the absence of urban regulation [18]. The new municipal government was dedicated to a comprehensive recovery of the old town, which received the European Urban Development Prize in 1994. A year later, the Special Plan for Reform of the Historic Quarter (PECHA) was approved, which included among its most ambitious proposals the creation of the Arnoia River Ethnographic Park [19] as a unifying element of a series of green spaces on both sides of the river, including the forest painted by the Basque artist Agustín Ibarrola in O Rexo (Table 1).

Table 1. Selected statistics of Allariz.

Evolution of Population ¹	2000	2010	2023
Population	5.158	5.910	6.378
Population rates (%) ¹	Aegin	Renewal	Dependency
2021 (year)	194.97	103.45	61.53
Debt, rent and unemployment ² (municipal level)	2013	2017	2021
Debt (EURk per year)	5.850	4.206	3.620
Debt (EURk per capita)	966	698	573
Gross rent (EUR)	19.994	21.654	24.257
Disposable income (EUR)	16.915	18.239	19.646
Unemployment rate (%)	19.07	12.00	11.09

¹ INE; ² <https://datosmacro.expansi%C3%B3n.com/>, accessed on 25 June 2024.

This fluvial space has become a major tourist hub, and in it are located the park of Portovello, where the International Garden Festival takes place, with a recovered mill used as a restaurant, the Leather Museum of Allariz, a civic center and various sports facilities. There are also avenues and river beaches, making it all in all an idyllic setting that offers aquatic activities for the family in the riverbed of the once polluted river Arnoia (in Figure 2, in the meander further north of the river). The growth experienced by the town since the 1990s has occurred following the main roads that, historically, put in contact Galicia, Castile and León and Portugal, especially on its northern edge following again the road arteries, which explains its current star-shaped plane. Throughout its periphery, the appearance of new low-density buildings, exempt and semi-detached houses with large gardens that maintain a certain harmony with the environment is widespread, trying to avoid unwanted congestive effects, although it is an unsustainable growth model [20].



Figure 2. Allariz. Source: <https://www.ign.es/>, accessed on 25 June 2024.

All this improvement in the historical space and the fluvial environment has also followed a strategy marked by the municipal council's focus on tourist promotion and the

revitalization of the economy of the town. In the mid-1990s, there was a proliferation of craft shops occupying the renovated buildings of the old town, to which were added other outlet stores of important national textile firms and the opening of numerous establishments dedicated to hospitality, as well as two municipal museums (toy and fashion). The main result of this feverish economic activity has been the reduction in the city's unemployment rate to almost half since 2000 (11.09%).

The Alarican economy currently revolves around binomial heritage and nature [21]. The enhancement in heritage elements enhanced the cultural vision of the town, to which were added the branch of the Silver Way of the Camino de Santiago. This culture of respect for the environment, history and tradition, the essence of Allariz, emanates directly from municipal policies where citizen participation is fundamental. It is not strange therefore that the city had, according to the statistics of sustainability indicators in its section of social cohesion, a rate of associationism in 2023 of 19.44, similar to that of Barcelona with 19.87 and far above the value of Madrid, with a meagre 0.89. This neighborhood involvement is reflected in the popular debate of all the urban development actions already mentioned and in the continuous development of new proposals, such as the search for energy self-sufficiency (biomass power plants), environmentally friendly agricultural production (Ecoespacio de O Rexo), awarded architectural recoveries in rural villages, ongoing activities in the Hogar del Mayor and the agreement with the Andrea association in San Salvador dos Penedos, dedicated to the recovery of donkeys in semi-freedom for providing therapy to disabled people.

3.2. Almagro

This small town is located just over 30 km southeast of the provincial capital of Ciudad Real. In its surroundings, you can see some of the few traces of extinct volcanic activity on the peninsula (volcano museum of Cerro Gordo or Cerro de la Yezosa). Although there is speculation about when the city emerged, the human presence in the area was ancient because, the landscapes that make up the region of Calatrava to which the municipality belongs, passed through it pre-Roman peoples, Romans, Visigoths, Muslims, Christians and French. In the Middle Ages, the city was the headquarters of the Military Order of Calatrava, whose main consequence was the construction of numerous noble houses and palaces, convents and hospitals. The arrival of the Fugger family (Fúcar) to the town, bankers of Carlos I, caused the economic revival of the city thanks to the exploitation of the mercury mines of Almadén, directed from Almagro. To this was added the trade of wool and its fabrics (lace and blondas), and the University of the Virgin of the Rosary (1574) was founded. In the 18th century, Almagro was the capital of the province of La Mancha for more than ten years and King Carlos IV granted it the title of city in 1794. However, this century marked the beginning of the decline of the city, which was aggravated in the following century by the Confiscation of 1836. Its location determines its present urban morphology. Its role as a city of passage, at a crossroads, defines its special radial morphology and its compact character due to the wall that surrounded it.

From a demographic point of view, the population of the city seems to have cut off the demographic drain exacerbated after the closure of the mercury mines in Almadén and thanks to the diversification of its economy [22]. Despite losing 10% of its inhabitants from 1950, the truth is that since the year 2000, the population of the city has gone back slightly to almost 9000 inhabitants being present today. This positive demographic evolution means that the municipality presents a rate of aging that is not very pronounced, which is reflected in a pyramid in which the population groups between 35 and 64 years of age dominate. This situation conditions their lower dependency rates and positive renewal rates thanks to the arrival of new residents, young adults and children, who have taken up residence in this place looking for better living conditions and services—all this despite being located in one of the provinces called Empty Spain, characterized by very negative variables associated with the strong weight of the primary sector, high unemployment and very low per capita GVA levels [17]. Despite these values, Almagro shows increasing incomes and lower

municipal debt out of all the cases studied, although it does present a high unemployment rate, although it has been reduced by half since 2000 (Table 2).

Table 2. Selected statistics of Almagro.

Evolution of Population ¹	2000	2010	2023
Population	8.262	8.855	8.958
Population rates (%) ¹	Aging	Renewal	Dependency
2021 (year)	126.48	85.52	48.83
Debt, rent and unemployment ² (municipal level)	2013	2017	2021
Debt (EURk per year)	5.045	4.281	2.820
Debt (EURk per capita)	554	477	317
Gross rent (EUR)	19.212	20.851	25.121
Disposable income (EUR)	16.379	17.680	18.842
Unemployment rate (%)	29.64	22.09	17.7

¹ INE; ² <https://datosmacro.expansi%C3%B3n.com/>.

In 1886, the walls and gates of the city were demolished and, although there were some suburbs outside the wall perimeter, the first major expansion of the urban nucleus in its northern sector would occur, with a place chosen for the construction of the bullring and the railway station, which arrived in the city in 1861 (in the north of Figure 3). The urban sprawl of the orthogonal plot chosen as an expansion plan in this urban area contrasts with the irregularity of the block and street housing of the historic medieval core. Throughout the 21st century urban growth has been filling the empty spaces around the promenade of the station, in the northern area, but especially in its southern edge, where the most modern buildings that introduce typologies of housing that respect the harmony of the environment can be found. In addition, the entire urban complex also stands out for the volumetric homogeneity of its residential areas (single-story or ground-floor houses plus a main one), only broken up by the numerous palaces and ecclesiastical constructions (churches and monasteries). The historic quarter was declared a historic-artistic site in 1972. The concern for the recovery of the cultural role played by the city can also be seen in the recovery of almost twenty buildings of great historical significance between 1980 and 2010 [22]. In conclusion, despite having been a crossroads city, the urban structure of the city is characterized by its compactness, forming almost a perfect circle and with little urbanization along these roads.

Talking about Almagro today is often associated with theater. The city is one of the leading Spanish performing arts hosts thanks to its Almagro International Classical Theatre Festival (FITCA) held since 1978 [23], its Ibero-American Contemporary Theatre Festival, which has 23 editions, and its celebration in 2003 of the University Creation Festival (CUAL). The main and best-known theater of the city is the Corral de Comedias, declared a National Monument in 1955. It is the only theater of the XVII century (1628) that remains intact and that has been proposed by the municipality to UNESCO to be part of the World Heritage List. To this can be added three more theaters in the historic center of the city, the theater-laboratory La Veleta and the Silo, a big building that stored grain, which is now converted into a cultural center for multiple uses. Apart from the theaters in the town, the Gastronomic Contest “City of Almagro” (eight editions) and the Meeting of Bobbin Lace (25 editions) are also held. During the month during which the main festival lasts, the city increases its population to almost 60,000 inhabitants, with tourism characterized by loyalty, youth and a high level of education and medium–high income. Its economic impact on the city is very important; it was estimated in 2015 to be EUR 3.8 million [24,25]. The commitment to culture as the main economic engine of the city is a reality and has always been present in the politics of its mayors, although alternation between the main national parties has been constant in the last 20 years.



Figure 3. Almagro. Source: <https://www.ign.es/>.

Its Holy Week is also interesting from cultural and economic points of view. This festivity was declared of National Tourist Interest and is characterized by “the armaos”, religious brotherhoods that represent the Roman soldiers and that maintain the military heritage of the imperial troops of the XVI–XVII centuries. Almagro also has four museums: the National Theatre Museum (unique in Spain, dedicated to the performing arts), the Campo de Calatrava Ethnographic Museum, the Bobbing Lace Museum and the Contemporary Art Space in the Hospital of San Juan de Dios. In addition, the nucleus is located on several historical-cultural routes such as the Land of the Knights, the Routes of Don Quixote 3 and 4, the Cañada Real Soriana and the Almodóvar film route, and it is close to the Tablas de Daimiel National Park. The city had an association rate in 2023 of 11.72, far from the values of Barcelona (19.87) and well above the value of Madrid (0.89).

3.3. Astorga

The small historic town of Astorga is located at the foot of the Montes de León, between the two most important cities of the province, León and Ponferrada, of which it is almost equidistant by just over 50 km, respectively. This urban nucleus was founded by the Romans in 15 B.C. on the remains of an old Astur settlement located on a rocky promontory that dominated the river plains Jerga and Tuerto. Asturica Augusta, from which the city received its current toponym, was located at a crossroads formed by two of the main Roman roads of the Iberian Peninsula and today corresponds to the Camino de Santiago (E–W) and the Silver Route (N–S). Its urban role and income status remain today. Astorga serves as a service center for a transition space between the river valleys and plains of the Páramo and the slopes of the mountain range of the Montes de León, on which are located the traditional regions of La Maragatería and La Cepeda [26].

The city and its municipality present a worrying demographic reality, marked by aging and a lack of generational replacement. As shown in Table 3, the city has suffered a loss of 16.5% of its population in the last two decades, with a pyramid of older people who are dependent and have a low rate of renewal.

Table 3. Selected statistics of Astorga.

Evolution of Population ¹	2000	2010	2023
Population	12.377	12.015	10.321
Population rates (%) ¹	Aging	Renewal	Dependency
2021 (year)	215.27	71.60	64.78
Debt, rent and unemployment ² (municipal level)	2013	2017	2021
Debt (EURk per year)	1.817	2.775	3.710
Debt (EURk per capita)	151	213	352
Gross rent (EUR)	20.289	21.219	23.527
Disposable income (EUR)	17.231	18.103	19.732
Unemployment rate (%)	25.60	18.78	16.60

¹ INE; ² <https://datosmacro.expansi%C3%B3n.com/>.

However, Astorga continues to act as a regional capital, a crossroads of transport, an episcopal seat (since the third century) and a commercial center and provides services for the population of a large area. The current diversification of its economic base has its fundamental basis in the tertiary sector (transport, commercial, public and ecclesiastical administration and military with an artillery barrack, in the NW corner in Figure 4), to which is added a remarkable industrial activity concentrated in the agro-food sector and the rise of cultural tourism [27]. This is clearly reflected in the increase in the level of economic income.



Figure 4. Astorga. Source: <https://www.ign.es/>.

With regard to cultural facilities, the city has among its services an Official School of Music and a Language School, a Municipal Library and the Gullón Theatre. Its museums include the Roman Museum (built on the Ergástula, the remains of the ancient Roman Forum), the Cathedral Museum, the Chocolate Museum (in an old house and chocolate factory in the city), the Museum of Time, the Chocolate Interpretation Centre, the Panero House Museum and the Roads Museum (located in a Bishop Palace built by the well-known

Catalonian architect Gaudí). To all this we must add the Roman Route of Astorga, which shows the archaeological remains best preserved in the intramural enclosure, many of which are in the basements and below the new houses of the old town. In addition, Astorga is an arrival and departure stage on the route of the French Camino de Santiago.

The city of Astorga is a member of the Spanish Association of Festivals and Historical Recreations. In its urban space are celebrated, since 1986, the festivals of Astures and Romans, which was declared of Regional Tourist Interest in 2011. In 2018, the Napoleonic invasion was recreated, in an event that attracted more than 1000 figurants. The playful and festive nature of this type of celebration is enriched by the holding of numerous cultural events in the forms of conferences, book presentations and living classrooms in which culture, lifestyle and traditional crafts are explained. To these festivities are also added the Saturday of Piñata (carnival), the Holy Week (declared of National Tourist Interest), the festivities in honor of Santa Marta and the Zuiza. All of them are celebrations that have as a main characteristic the direct and voluntary participation of the inhabitants of the city, to which is added a good number of foreigners who, as tourists or direct participants in these events, fill its streets and significantly increase the economic income of the city.

Its neighbors are vigilant and concerned about safeguarding the city's culture and its legacy. This was evidenced by the recent case of the use of the Casa Museo de los Panero (a museum dedicated to local poets and writers) for the celebration of a Halloween party, a fact that motivated the written protest by associations and neighbors to move to another more appropriate place since it was not agreed upon to be used [28]. For performances like this, it should not be surprising that the city had a rate of associationism in 2023 of 17.63%.

As in the previous case studied, the reality of the city of Astorga must also be contextualized in its relationship with its environment, especially with the region of Maragatería, rich in cultural, ethnographic and gastronomic heritage, which enriches its cultural offerings and from which they benefit each other. It should be noted that cultural activities and projects can promote urban and territorial transformation by improving the connection between people and the physical environment [29].

3.4. Puigcerdá

This small town of Girona is the capital of Baja Cerdaña and is located in a valley on the northern slope of the Pyrenees at 1200 m. above sea level, although it receives great insolation for its EO disposition. Unlike the other cases analyzed in these pages, the urban nucleus of Puigcerdá is characterized by its isolation and does not present a larger urban nucleus in its vicinity. This situation changed with the construction of the Cadí tunnel, between 1982 and 1984, which put this remote mountain valley less than two hours of a drive from the city of Barcelona, which has multiplied the arrival of tourists and visitors to a space that, at the beginning of the last century, was a resting place for the well-to-do families of Catalan society. The town guards access to the Peninsula through the valley of the Segre River which acts as a natural border between Spain and France for part of its route.

Its location and surroundings have had a human presence since the Paleolithic, although it did not emerge as a town until the end of the 12th century, the century of its foundation by Alfonso I. It has been precisely this border character function that has marked most of its history. Banditry, smuggling, wars (against the French and the Carlists) and occupations were common in these lands until the government of the nation allowed the town to demolish the walls of the fortification in 1885, of which there are just a few remains scattered throughout the city. At the end of the nineteenth century, once its fortified frontier core stage had passed, Puigcerdá and Sardinia became the fashionable summer resorts of the Catalan bourgeoisie, especially the city of Barcelona, which was sought as the ideal place to build sumptuous villas surrounding the ponds (see Figure 5) [30]. At the beginning of the 20th century, Schierbeck Park was created, the Danish consul of Barcelona, who donated the land, giving the whole a great landscape quality enjoyed by its inhabitants today. Some of these buildings have changed their residential use to hotels, apartments or

cultural facilities for the city, such as the Municipal School of Music Issi Fabra, the Villa Azucena and the Regional Council of Cerdanya. The expansion of the city on its southern edge has preferred a type of dispersed settlement in the form of low-density buildings and multi-family housing blocks that share little or nothing in common with the aesthetics of an old town that has also undergone a strong transformation. Since the 1990s, a policy of repatrimonialization of its public spaces has been carried out by the different nationalist governments that, for several decades, have been taking turns in power [31].



Figure 5. Puigcerdá. Source: <https://www.ign.es/>.

The specialization of the region in winter sports began with the opening of the ski resort of La Molina in 1910, which would be followed by others later. This activity has recently been joined by golf, with three courses in the vicinity. This shift in economic paradigm led to the abandonment of traditional livelihoods associated with agriculture and livestock in the 1980s. The younger population sought new job opportunities in construction, ski resorts or tourism while the depopulation of the more remote villages and the aging of their population became more evident [32]. If we look at the demographic data (Table 4), the city has experienced a remarkable growth and has a low rate of municipal aging compared to the other cases presented here. Its young and young adult population makes the rate of renewal positive and the dependency very low. This is possible because of the low rate of unemployment, bordering on full employment.

From a cultural point of view, the city began to stand out at the end of the 19th century. The conversion of the well-to-do Catalan classes into a holiday destination led to the construction of the Teatro-Casino Ceretano. Since the second half of the 20th century, the city has hosted under various formats, the International Courses of Romanesque Culture, Superior Courses of Romanesque Culture and Humanities, and the International Colloquiums of Archaeology. In addition, its main cultural milestones include the creation of the Institute of Ceretans Studies and the Regional Historical Archive [33]. Puigcerdá has several museums and monuments and, in the last decade, has joined binomial culture-tourism with its Ruiz Zafón route, based on the literary success, “The Game of the Angel”, which immerses the visitor in a route marked with granite monoliths following the route of the protagonist of the novel through the town. The rate of associationism in 2023 was

12.80%. The city is also part of several historical itineraries such as the roads of San Jaume or the Good Men and has a wide cultural heritage scattered throughout the valley (megalithic monuments, Romanesque, military archaeology). In recent decades, activities related to leisure sports, cycling and hiking routes have been offered to get visitors in contact with the way of life of the mountainous area, also including taking care of its landscapes (care and maintenance of meadows) and promoting the values of the region and the survival of the traditional way of life that still maintains important livestock activity.

Table 4. Selected statistics of Puigcerdá.

Evolution of Population ¹	2000	2010	2023
Population	6.902	8.746	9.764
Population rates (%) ¹	Aging	Renewal	Dependency
2021 (year)	108.87	87.25	43.32
Debt, rent and unemployment ² (municipal level)	2013	2017	2021
Debt (EURk per year)	5.881	5.105	5.445
Debt (EURk per capita)	660	578	766
Gross rent (EUR)	23.504	25.665	29.200
Disposable income (EUR)	19.603	21.273	21.882
Unemployment rate (%)	12.94	7.68	5.82

¹ INE; ² <https://datosmacro.expansi%C3%B3n.com/>.

3.5. Trujillo

The city is located almost 40 km west of the provincial capital of Cáceres by the A-58 motorway, open to traffic in 2019. The small town of Trujillo is located on a granite promontory, which maintains a favorable situation as a crossroads. Up to this point, several routes converge that have been used by a large number of peoples throughout their extensive historical occupation, as well as in the other cases studied here. In its surroundings, megalithic constructions have been found (tumuli and dolmens) that refer to primitive human occupations. Offering a privileged place for defense and an abundance of water have been key elements of its continuous occupation throughout history. During the Roman occupation, it was called Turgalium. The Romans were followed by the Visigoths and the Arabs who built the fortress, reservoirs and much of the wall during the Caliph period. This border city grows under Castilian rule, the town becomes a lordship and the city grows outside the walls. But the main milestone in the history of the nucleus appeared with the discovery of America. The city is home to the conquerors Francisco Pizarro, Francisco de Orellana and Alonso de Hinojosa, among many others, who built palaces, chapels and hospitals in the city. Wars with Portugal, succession and Spanish independence marked its decline and the destruction of its built heritage. Today, Trujillo can be described as a service center (administrative, judicial, sanitary and commercial) that serves an eminently rural region [34] and whose area of influence has been reduced due to the shortening of displacements in the provincial capital by the A-58.

The city had its maximum population in 1950, with 14,587 inhabitants. This process of demographic regression has been widespread in the province, where the concentration of the population in the main urban centers contrasts with the progressive abandonment of rural areas. This is a situation that Trujillo has not been able to escape, which has seen its population shrink to just over 8700 in 2023, despite the slight increases in the previous decade. As a result, the demographic aging experienced by its population is notorious, which in turn conditions a low rate of renewal and a progressive increase in dependency. Although the city has seen its gross and net incomes grow (although they are the lowest of all the cases studied) and had a low municipal debt, the weakness of the local economy means that the unemployment rate affects almost one in five inhabitants and causes the young population to migrate in search of better job expectations. The reality of this small

city is a clear reflection of what the Extremadura region is experiencing, marked by a weak economy, with a strong primary sector and a weak industry (Table 5).

Table 5. Selected statistics of Trujillo.

Evolution of Population ¹	2000	2010	2023
Population	8.173	9.692	8.713
Population rates (%) ¹	Aging	Renewal	Dependency
2021 (year)	201.50	73.91	51.44
Debt, rent and unemployment ² (municipal level)	2013	2017	2021
Debt (EURk per year)	2.984	1.812	474
Debt (EURk per capita)	328	195	54
Gross rent (EUR)	18.021	19.120	21.501
Disposable income (EUR)	15.490	16.461	17.383
Unemployment rate (%)	29.84	21.63	18.04

¹ INE; ² <https://datosmacro.expansi%C3%B3n.com/>.

From an urban point of view, the city experienced its greatest splendor around the second half of the 16th century. The many inhabitants with lineages of the city returning from the conquest of America left records of their wealth by the construction of large residences and palaces around the Plaza del Arrabal, which made up the appearance of the old town and remained without major alterations until well into the twentieth century. During this century, Trujillo opened to the outside and extended over the walls of the Alcazaba, extending through to the outer areas of the consolidated helmet through some residential enclaves, making the main square the new center of the life of its inhabitants (in the center of Figure 6). In the 1940s, in the face of the worrying situation of deterioration of the built heritage that represents the city, the mayor attempted to declare Trujillo a Monumental City, but it was not until 1962 when the Historic Center of Trujillo was declared of Cultural Interest (BIC) with the category of Historic Site. The city has only nine BICs and an extensive historical heritage and vernacular architecture inventoried. During the 1960s of the 20th century, there was the transformation of its monumental area, especially of its main square, which acquired its current appearance, aimed at promoting tourism in the city [35]. The city grew in a planned way that expanded away from the walled enclosure and chose the national road V as axis of expansion with the point of absorbing the old rural nucleus of Huerta de las Ánimas (see Figure 6). It is in this new area of the city where we can find new building typologies, both collective and single-family housing, and industrial buildings. This is the area where extensive equipment and large green areas are concentrated on public soil, including cattle tracks with important affections for the cultural landscape and the conservation of the Berrocal de Trujillo (weekend constructions, photovoltaic plants, etc.) [36].

The recovery of the historic city and its value as a cultural and tourist resource has been one of the objectives sought by the different political governments that have succeeded in this small Extremadura city. The city itself and its surrounding environment are its main resources, and its managers and inhabitants know this because in Trujillo, the rate of association in 2023 was 19.52, the highest of all the cases studied. The city is one of the most important landmarks of the Route of the Conquerors. Its historic quarter has hosted the Historical Colloquiums of Extremadura since 1971 and since 1986, the National Cheese Fair of Trujillo. The care of its historical area led to Trujillo becoming a film set. Since the 1963 filming of *La Tulipe Noire*, with Alain Delón, numerous films have been shot in the city: *The Family of Pascual Duarte*, *La lozana andaluza*, *Flesh and Blood*, *1492: Conquest of Paradise*, *La Marrana* and *La Celestina*, among others. In recent decades, numerous television series have also been filmed such as *Game of Thrones* and *The Dragon's House*, *Isabel*, *Cathedral of the Sea*, *Hispania* and *Still Star-Crossed*, among the most outstanding.



Figure 6. Trujillo. Source: <https://www.ign.es/>.

4. Discussion

The case studies analyzed in this paper have shown how the commitment to local culture has allowed for the establishment of specialization compared to other nearby towns. It is something that other researchers have also pointed out when studying other small cities, both in Spain (including Teruel [37]), and in other countries such as France [13], Argentina [38] and Brazil [39].

Figure 7 brings together the data on the indicators studied in the five cities. In the first graph, the demographic size tends to remain the same in all the examples; Astorga decreases a little and Allariz grows slightly, but a marked drop was not observed. The unemployment rate suffers an initial rise during the Great Recession and then decreases in all five cases until the slight rebound caused by the pandemic in 2020. In any case, the trend shows a positive evolution of the labor market in these five locations. However, the demographic pyramid and the data in the table show the aging of the population and the risks in the medium and long term if rejuvenation does not occur through migration, which seems to occur in these small cities, with the possible exception of Astorga, which is the one with the most worrying demographic data. The level of associationism of the five towns serves to verify the social development achieved in all of them with the commitment to culture and local identity, while the rise in the level of income is a consequence of the attraction of new neighbors and the development of new economic activities, in many cases related to the cultural project of each town. Finally, the last graph shows the political parties that lead the mayoralty of the five municipalities in the period of 2000–2022. This figure conveys that the important thing is not that a single political party capitalizes on the local development proposal, which occurred in Allariz and to a lesser extent in Puigcerdá, but that the driving idea, the resilient and sustainable strategy of local identity as a lever for the human development of the population is shared by the entire political spectrum, as happened in Astorga, Almagro and Trujillo.

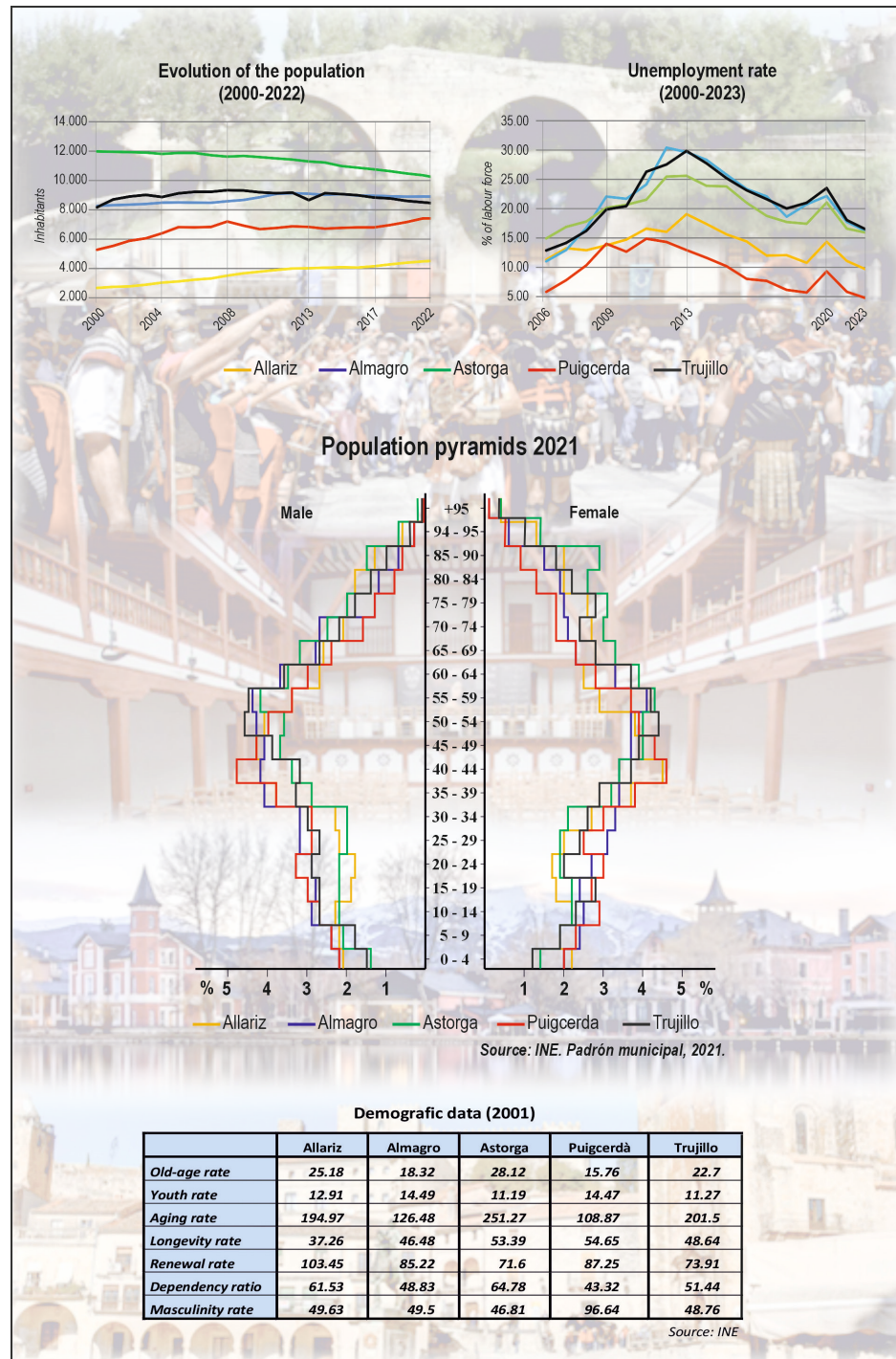


Figure 7. Cont.

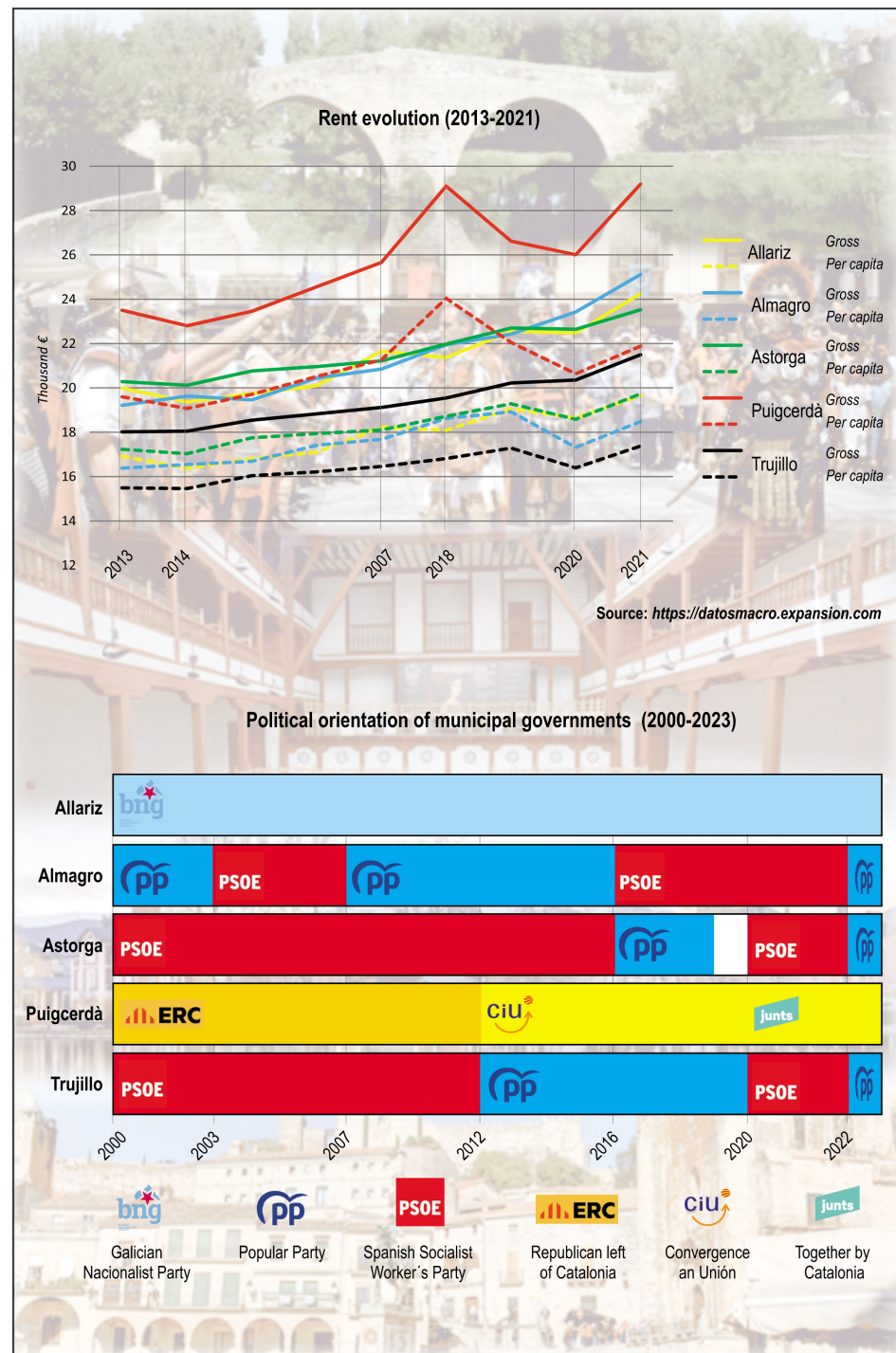


Figure 7. Comparative graphs and tables of the case studies (Source: INE, Expansión and Ministerio de Interior). Source: <https://www.ine.es>; <https://datosmacro.expansion.com/>, accessed on 25 June 2024.

The analysis carried out on the five selected small towns enabled us to understand the difficulty, in a settlement with these characteristics, in overcoming the regressive demographic dynamics and the economic atony that prevails in rural areas. County capitals remain the nerve centers of an aging and passive territory. They must therefore make enormous efforts to maintain the population and investment in their municipalities. The easiest thing to do is to take a contemplative attitude and let the processes take their course. The revolutionary attitude is to resist by proposing day-to-day solutions. This is

the slogan that the towns we have chosen as case studies seem to have agreed upon. The local governments of Allariz, Almagro, Astorga, Puigcerdá and Trujillo continually propose new actions and new cultural projects to reactivate their inhabitants from time to time and thus keep their local society awake. Development in these small towns is not associated with growth, but with maintenance. The important thing is not to plan new residential neighborhoods or an industrial estate; the important thing is to maintain the population, services, employment opportunities, collective and individual well-being, and identity.

The five towns share a past in which their importance was greater than in the present. These glorious pasts are what explain the built heritage and the heritage processes that have developed in them since the last third of the twentieth century. This historical identity was regained in the twenty-first century, but not with a pessimistic feeling of regret for its negative evolution, but as a unifying element among the population. It is a shared identity that forges the social commitment necessary to face the challenges of being a small city in a rural context of a deindustrialized country. But this process of revaluation of the historical past, of local identification, is only the beginning of a long project that must lead to an improvement in the quality of life of its inhabitants. This improvement is achieved with a political and socioeconomic agenda in which the celebration of events and cultural programming is fundamental, understanding these more as recreational activities for the enjoyment of leisure time of the local population than as a factor of tourist attraction. If a project is understood and defended by local political parties, there may be alternation in municipal government without the idea-force of cultural identity dissolving and continuing to grow collective well-being. This projection of the local quality of life must be attractive enough to generate new population arrivals to these towns that rejuvenate the age structure. This includes young families that choose Allariz, Almagro, Astorga, Puigcerdá or Trujillo to develop their life project, whether they come from the unbearable metropolitan peripheries or from other rural or urban areas.

The key to changing attitudes, from passive pessimism to active optimism, is citizen participation. In the examples analyzed and as a conclusion extrapolable to other small cities, citizen participation is basic, both in the debate on proposed solutions and in the benefits obtained from them. To encourage this participation, it is first necessary to promote and regulate associations and give them important value in the governance model. Administration must be a catalyzing instrument and offer management solutions, but the model of a city that is pursued must belong to all residents, or at least to the vast majority. And a suitable framework that facilitates the creation of this climate of citizen participation is the promotion of local culture and identity.

In the cases analyzed, we were able to observe a substantial improvement in the selected statistical indicators. Although demographic aging is common in all of them, as it is throughout Europe, the figures are qualified by other indicators such as the general evolution of the population or the dependence rate. Income indices also show a positive and differential evolution with respect to the surrounding territories. Unemployment rates are reduced and become a clear symptom of the vitality that seems to have settled in these small cities and that makes them attractive to the arrival of new residents. The authorities of these towns know the potential of resources, most of them inherited, which have been valued with differentiating and innovative proposals that respect this legacy and that have the approval and determined support of their inhabitants. This is another element that can be extrapolated to other places, starting from local heritage, but not with a museum-like vision, but as a driving force for structural change.

Based on the analysis carried out in Allariz, Almagro, Astorga, Puigcerdá and Trujillo, we can affirm that culture, either through the promotion of local identity and its popular exaltation through the festive calendar, the recovery of architectural and natural heritage, the conduct of academic activities (courses, forums, conferences, etc.), or the creation and management of cultural facilities (theaters, museums, villas), is a crucial element in the daily reality of these small cities. The local population enjoys this fact, which makes the difference compared to other places and allows them to feel proud of living there. The high

values of associationism show us the vitality of a population that does not correspond with the atony present in their surrounding spaces. Their sense of belonging to the place, the topophilia of which Yi-Fu Tuan spoke [40], is a priceless asset that cannot be bought or sold on any global market. It sounds like a facile slogan, but it is key as an extrapolated rule, to promote topophilia.

Research on the relationship between cultural promotion and the recent dynamics of small cities must be expanded upon with more case studies and comparative analyses with urban realities in other countries. The starting problems are similar and the solutions can be comparable. The sustainability of a settlement structure depends on the revitalization and resilience of the second tier, the small cities, and their future depends on the quality of life they can offer to their resident population in the coming years.

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