

---

# Tarragona: The transformation of an administrative capital and port into a post-industrial metropolis

---

**JOAN JOSEP PUJADAS MUÑOZ**

Universitat Rovira i Virgili  
*joanjosep.pujadas@urv.cat*

Tarragona has historically been known for its role as an administrative capital and archiepiscopal see. Only its port activity has been economically important, facilitating imports and exports of raw materials and manufactured goods. However, until recently this activity had not been connected to any local industrial, extractive or agricultural activity, but rather served the economy of the entire country.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike Barcelona or other industrial cities in Catalonia, which welcomed a large number of immigrants from southern Spain in the 1940s and 1950s,<sup>2</sup> Tarragona's population growth was minor at that time and only became significant when workers from southern Spain began arriving in the 1960s.<sup>3</sup>

---

1. Only a few industries laid down roots in Tarragona in the 1940s and 1950s. They included Tabacalera SA and CAMPSA, as well as a few isolated chemical companies and textile, asphalt and lumber industries. On the other hand, the traditional activity of alcohol transformation remained, which in the 1950s was represented by eighteen exporters and wine-growers, six spirits and liquor companies, and six companies making vermouth, concentrates and sparkling wines (Piqué, Virgili, 2003: 15).

2. The city's slow but steady industrialisation, as well as the burgeoning importance of the tourism sector from 1963 onwards, funnelled much of the population towards industry (24%) and services (59%), while agriculture employed half the number of people it had in 1950, only 6.58% of the total (Piqué, Virgili, 2003: 15).

3. At the start of this period, in 1965 Tarragona had three important chemical industries which employed almost 300 workers. But in one year alone, 1966, three companies – Compañía Española de Petróleos SA, Butano SA and Industrias Químicas Asociadas – moved there, with a total investment of 4,431 million pesetas and the creation of more than 600 jobs. Later, at the pace of one company per year, Dow Unquinesa SA (1967), Amoníaco de Tarragona (1968), BASF Española SA (1969) and Energía e Industrias Aragonesas SA (1970) also came to Tarragona, which meant a 1.61 billion peseta increase in investment and 300 more jobs. Yet, despite this brisk pace of new companies over six years, Tarragona's chemical industry was not hegemonic and still lagged behind more traditional sectors like food, beverages and tobacco. At the time, Tabacalera SA, which had 743 employees, remained the largest employer (Piqué, Virgili, 2003: 25).

The catalyst for Tarragona's economic growth associated with the industrial sector was the 1971 announcement of the installation of the oil refinery promoted by Spain's Central Government in its latest Development Plan. A new industrial dynamic emerged after the construction of the refinery, with inter-enterprise productive integration and a broader market perspective. Based on this, many more companies arrived and the sector became a key pillar of industrial and economic activity for the city and the towns in the Central Area of the Camp de Tarragona county.<sup>4</sup>

The city's demographic growth surged in the 1960s. In twenty years, the population of Tarragona rose by 247% from 45,273 inhabitants (1960) to 111,689 (1980). Despite the prominence of the chemical sector, the economic sector that provided the most jobs at that time was construction, needed to build the chemical companies' facilities, to create new tourism hubs and, especially, to build the homes required for the influx of immigrants that arrived over those two decades.

As shown on the map (Figure 1), the city's urban growth was mainly westward (to the Ponent neighbourhoods), from the city centre to the municipality of La Canonja on the northern side of the road leading to València. The large industries settled on the other side of that road. It was chaotic, improvised, unplanned urban development. The Bonavista neighbourhood, for example, is a telling case because after it was parcelled out, the residents built their homes themselves. The other central nucleus in the Ponent neighbourhoods was Torreforta, around which five more neighbourhoods sprang up over the years. The urban design was discontinuous, as each neighbourhood was surrounded by crop fields and vacant lots. Until the very end of the twentieth century, the only connection between the neighbourhoods was the main road. Roads and pathways connecting them directly were only built in the past thirty years. Two more nuclei were built north of the city, Sant Pere i Sant Pau and Sant Salvador, which were also isolated and only connected by main roads.

In the late twentieth century, along with the city's demographic shift, the new Tarragona saw the emergence of a combative new type of citizen who created very powerful, protesting neighbourhood associations which demanded local authorities to build infrastructures and urban facilities that would offset the shortcomings and the haphazard way these neighbourhoods had been built. This very neighbourhood movement also became the cradle of trade unionism and the hub of the anti-Franco sociopolitical struggle.

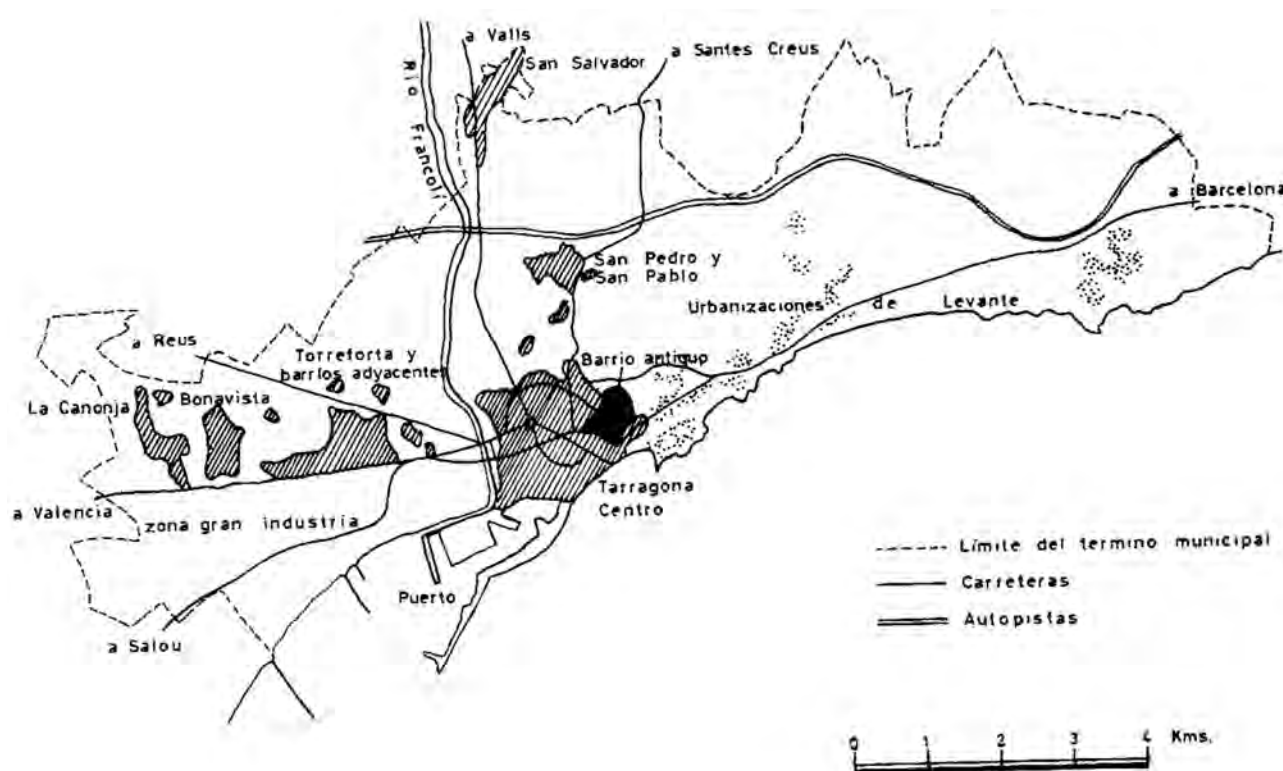
Fifty years later, despite the exponential improvement in facilities and infrastructures, there is still some ghettoisation, largely based on the new migratory flows in the past thirty years, with groups from Africa, Asia and Latin American moving into the neighbourhoods. The civic

---

4. The Tarragona petrochemical complex occupies around 1,200 hectares. The North Industrial Park encompasses the municipalities of Tarragona, Vila-seca, El Morell and La Pobla de Mafumet, while the South Industrial Park includes Tarragona, Vila-seca and La Canonja.

FIGURE 1

## The urban areas of Tarragona



SOURCE: Roquer, Santiago (1987).

dynamism of Tarragona's new residents in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s and their ability to mobilise has gradually waned. The lack of significant upward social mobility among the second and third generations has led to some ghettoisation and the emergence of xenophobic reactions that view the foreign population as the root of all social evils. An analysis of the leaning of electoral votes confirms this. But that is another story.

## References

- BARDAJÍ, Federico (2015). *Bonavista: una biografía social*. Tarragona: Silva.
- MARGALEF, Joaquim (2012). *Una visió econòmica al llarg del segle XX al Camp de Tarragona i les Terres de l'Ebre*. Tarragona: Edicions URV.
- PIQUÉ, Jordi; VIRGILI, M. Elena (2003). *Tarragona 1950-2000: Itinerari visual*. Valls: Cossetània.
- PUJADAS, Joan Josep; BARDAJÍ, Federico (1987). *Los barrios de Tarragona: Una aproximación antropológica*. Tarragona: Ajuntament de Tarragona.
- ROQUER, Santiago (1987). "Contrastes demográficos en el interior del espacio urbano de Tarragona". *Anales de Geografía de la Universidad Complutense*, 7, pp. 499-507.