



## SEVILLE: PLANNER'S EUROPE (ALMOST)

FAST FACTS		Similar To
Urbanized Area* Population	750,000	Honolulu, Ottawa, Lille
Urbanized Land Area: Square Miles	52	Ho Chi Minh City, Chicoutimi, Bologna, Xian
Urbanized Land Area: Square Kilometers	135	
Population per Square Mile	14,400	Barcelona, Budapest, Hiroshima, Cordoba
Population per Square Kilometer	5,600	
*Continuously built up area		

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Calling all North American urban planners. The Promised Land is in Spain. Eureka!

Well, almost.

Probably more than any other urban area, Seville (Sevilla) appears to fit the image of Europe that drives all too much urban planning and even policy in the United States. Seville is a charming city, and the broad expanses of suburbs that surround cities from Lisbon to Milan and Nantes to Zurich appear to be largely absent here.

There is good reason for it. It is not that residents of Seville prefer to live next to and on top of one another. It is that this is all they have been able to afford. Seville is a city dominated by multi-family dwellings, and much of it high-rise (10 levels and more). Seville is also a city that



has been somewhat left out of the economic boom that is transforming the Iberian peninsula, from the Algarve in Portugal to Valencia and Barcelona (not that things are at all unprosperous in Lisbon and Porto). But for all of its historical advantages, Seville has the disadvantage of being far inland, away from where British, German and Scandinavian retirees and their investments have flocked. Like their cousins from New York and Toronto who have transformed another peninsula (Florida), Iberian is being made over by people and money in quantities that Florida

could never accommodate. But not in Seville, because from here a view of the ocean requires an hour or more drive.

And drive they do. Despite the fact that so many people live in apartments and condominiums, they still rely principally on their cars. This “ideal of Europe” appears to have a no higher public transport market share than elsewhere. It appears that the share of travel on public transport in Seville is between 10 and 15 percent, near the estimated European average. Per capita ridership is less than in Ottawa and similar to Honolulu (both similar in size). But, of course, there are plans for urban rail (things could be worse --- they could be planning mag-lev or nuclear powered PRT). Of course, all of the public transport vision adds up to nothing more than a rail line here and a rail line there, and not much improvement in mobility.

Seville is one of the high-income world’s few urbanized areas geographically small enough for a truly automobile competitive public transport system to be established, one that would provide quick mobility for virtually all trips inside the urbanized area. But, despite the high population density, it is not high enough. At Seville’s population density, an efficiently designed automobile competitive public transport system would cost approximately one-third of the local gross regional product per capita, *each* year. Most urban areas spend less than two percent of their gross regional product on public transport, including Hong Kong, where the highest population densities in the world (by far), combined with a very small urban foot, by far make it possible for virtually all trips to be made by public transport that is competitive with the automobile.

Seville, like most other old European cities, has an attractive, very crowded core. It is very well defined, and covers little more than a square mile. Automobiles compete with pedestrians for rights to roadways narrower than walkways in suburban commercial centers. The typical center city boutiques and tourist shops are here, because this is where the tourist (including urban planners) go. Inside the core, and adjacent, especially on the south side are the Cathedrals and other buildings of historical significance, some of the most attractive in Europe.

The Seville urbanized area is very dense, at more than 14,000 per square mile. Core districts are also dense, at more than 35,000 per square mile. These core districts, however, are barely one-half as dense as the ville de Paris (the municipality of Paris, also a department of France, generally inside the Boulevard Peripherique) or Manhattan (the borough of New York, home of what still remains the highest concentration of “skyscrapers” in the world), At least eight times



as much land area in Los Angeles is more dense than the Seville urbanized area and five times as much land in the sprawl of Los Angeles is more dense than Seville’s core districts. Yet Seville is one of the most dense urbanized areas in Western Europe, similar to the density of Barcelona. But Seville’s density is more uniform than Barcelona’s, because the suburbs are not so well developed in Seville, and the core densities are lower.

Building densities fall off sharply

outside this small area, and streets get wider, much wider. The wide boulevards typical of so many Spanish cities are here, from Madrid, Barcelona and Malaga to Buenos Aires and Mexico City. These roadways greatly facilitate the traffic flow, to some degree neutralizing the traffic congestion inducing impact of high density. Driving is not nearly the challenging activity in Seville as in other European cities. Indeed, the pre-automobile urban planners of Seville did a better job of accommodating the automobiles they couldn't foresee than their modern equivalents whose plans assume a future of fiction and fantasy.

But for those interested in seeing the Seville that is Europe as it almost was, time is slipping away. As the rental car proceeds farther from the core, things change radically. Not too far to the east, beyond the railway station and the interestingly named Avenida de Kansas City (the two are sister cities) is a huge central city shopping center with plenty of parking. Further east commercial strip development begins and is indistinguishable from the low-rise centers that will be found around the rest of Western Europe, the New World and Japan.

Seville may appear, at first glance, to have been adding population, contrary to the trend of other European central cities. In fact, however, this was illusionary, because the municipality itself had enough peripheral greenfield space to accommodate new development, unlike most other European cities. However, in the last census period (1991-2001), Seville lost three percent of its population, as the exodus from the core has begun. Greater affluence, to some degree the result of joining the European Union, is the culprit.

Large industrial parks and commercial developments are found along the ring road, too remote for access by public transport, except those not yet affluent enough to own a car. Given the low public transport market share, this may not be many. But there are also high-rise apartment buildings along the ring road, a sight less frequently seen along ring roads in parts of Western Europe that became affluent earlier. Outside the ring road strip commercial developments line some of the freeways, but not all.

But, Seville is becoming more like Europe every day. Across the Guadalquivir River to the west are growing suburbs, though somewhat modest in size. Residential buildings are lower rise, and shopping centers more suburban. But the real change is occurring further away. For example, nearly 10 miles west, at Autovia (freeway) exit 11, is a large new commercial center that could cover, all by itself, close to one-half square kilometer. There are already a number of retail and



wholesale businesses and much additional construction. This center defines leap-frog development. To the south are new, single family houses ("casas unifamiliares"). To the west a bit further, in Benacazon, will be found a large town-house (row house) development as suburban as a new urbanist community built in the exurbs. Even further west is the village of Huevar, where town house construction is also starting. The Autovia (freeway) provides quick, uncrowded access to the Seville area for the new residents



who don't find jobs in the developing exurbs. Seville may be unique in having largely missed out on suburbanization and, to use a technical term of urban planning, leap frogging directly to exurbanization.

But for those intent on seeing European urbanization consistent with their fantasies, Seville, despite its modest suburbanization, growing exurbanization and strip commercial development, is the place.













#### PICTURES

Core (#1-2)

Casas unifamiliares: Exurban Detached Housing  
(#3-5)

Exurban Row Houses: Benacazon

Row House Construction: Huevar

Exurban Commercial Center

Commercial Strip Outside Ring Road

Ring Road: Commercial Development

Ring Road: High Rise Residential Development

Strip Development: City of Seville (East Side)

By Wendell Cox

Urban Tours by Rental Car

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