Planning for Tourism on the Coast: Contributions to a Change in Attitude

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Abstract

This article provides a brief summary of the relationship between tourism, land planning law and municipal planning in Spain. It sets out the arguments which led to a change of model in a new era of tourism in which mass tourism, while still dominating the market, coexists with other forms of tourism.

A second section presents three paradigmatic cases from the author’s professional practice. Two of them are examples of plans which served to revise excessive provisions for construction on the Catalan coast (Lloret de Mar and Mont-roig del Camp), while the third was the planning of a section of the seafront in Palma de Mallorca where, despite the obstacle of private property rights, an important urban park was created.

These cases are preceded by the presentation of an ultimately frustrated counter-proposal dating from the early 1980s for the protection of a stretch of coastline on the Costa Dorada.

Introduction

Reality often obliges us to reformulate the provisions we make in the course of urban planning projects, often due to important changes in one or other of the support systems – whether in the infrastructure, or in political, social or economic systems. The tourism sector is one area in which the long term provisions for growth have been drastically revised over recent years.

In the 1960s many of the municipalities in our country experienced an explosive growth caused by the expansion of the tourist industry catalysed by the advent of paid holidays and affordable family cars – in the form of the famous Seat 600 – and the package holidays which made Spain a cheap destination for foreign tourists. This rapid growth, which continued into the 1970s, left a great part of our coastline irreversibly damaged.

The 1960s were years of great pressure and demand that led to the joint tourism and construction boom. There was a strong drive to build, with the ambition of capturing the tourist market whatever the cost. The slogan “Spain is different” characterized mass tourism, a previously unknown phenomenon, which by 1963 had brought 11 million tourists to the country. The quality and quantity of the town and territorial planning, however, often fell far short of the demand for land on which to build.

As a result, many towns along the coast drew up planning documents that could be conservatively described as “expansionist”. The plans invariably reclassified large swathes of territory as apt for
development without taking into consideration the inherent value of the natural and often unique landscapes that were affected.

The outcome was distressing. This is perhaps the most striking example of urban sprawl that we have in Spain, brought on by an explosion of building which often consumed land at a rate far superior to the rate of population growth, thus outstripping demand. It is difficult to find an area of coastline that escaped the development fever which fuelled – and was fuelled by – speculative investment by the property sector and continued unchecked until the restoration of democracy at the end of the seventies. From that moment many of the planning documents that had been drawn up under the 1956 Ley del Suelo – the national planning act – came under revision. The lack of rigour in the 1956 planning law led to a period characterized by the exploitation of its loopholes and ambiguity. It was with the approval of the 1975 planning act and in particular its regulations governing planning and territorial management, ratified by royal decree in 1978, that many of the planning documents of the time, which were based on provisions for astronomical growth in housing capacity, were revised and the provisions drastically reduced.

Step by step awareness of the need to protect our coastline grew, leading to amendments in the Spanish Constitution and, in 1988, a law was approved which regulated the whole of the Spanish coastline.

The promotion of the issue of coastal development and conservation was given an indirect boost by the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development, celebrated in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. A plan of action was drawn up following the conference which put great emphasis on the design of strategies with the aim of involving key sectors and players in the task of raising awareness and developing education programmes to reach all levels of society.

In 1997, 121 municipal councils approved a declaration entitled “Councils towards sustainability” in which they pledged to foment sustainable development in towns and cities, through applying the principles of Agenda 21 Local – promoting the participation of economic and social sectors in initiatives aimed at improving sustainability.

In a parallel initiative, the Environment Department of the Government of Catalonia made an important advance in the protection of natural conservation areas and wetlands along the coast. And with the latest planning laws, the cause of promoting sustainable development in Catalonia has been given a further boost as has that of raising awareness of environmental and landscape conservation issues, bringing Catalan law into line with European Union Directives.

Another notable step in the process of the institutions waking up to the precarious situation in which the enormous pressures of recent decades had left our coastline, were the demands that measures be adopted to conserve the habitats and landscapes in those few areas which had remained untouched. To this end, the Catalan Government drew up special planning regulations for coastal areas (the Planes directores urbanísticos del sistema costero), thanks to which many kilometres of the Catalan coast have been saved from development.

But the beginnings of this Copernican shift can be traced back 40 years to when, as mentioned earlier, the first democratic municipal councils, backed by the 1975 planning law and regulations, set about revising the expansionist planning documents they had inherited from their predecessors. They established criteria for declassifying coastal land where it was legally and economically possible, or, if the process was at a more advanced stage, they worked to redirect the emphasis of the detailed planning documents for the affected areas towards more flexible solutions which would ensure the maximum possible protection for existing natural assets.

1 There are isolated exceptions, such as the estates of a few large landowners who resisted the changes. These cases often represented only temporary reprieves as on the death of the landowner, the heirs were often keen to catch up with the boom.
Another point to consider is the significant cost of the phenomenon of unchecked touristic development to the local economy. In the case of a tourist destination, the effects are clearly pernicious, since its attractiveness resides to a significant degree in the quality of its landscapes and surrounding area, in its capacity to offer an environment of a much higher quality than the urban areas from which most of its visitors will have come.

The degradation of the surrounding environment will have an immediate negative impact on the attractiveness of the area, with a consequent progressive reduction in the number of visitors – who in today’s market have an ever larger number of destinations to choose from, or else force the locality to pursue the “cheap and cheerful” sector of the market and a tourism model with little or no “added value”. As Salvador Antón noted, the strategies for upgrading the Catalan tourist destinations have come a long way in the last few years. The renovation strategies (the correction of deficits in the urban fabric, image improvement, the upgrading of tourist premises) which characterized the second half of the 1980s gave way in the early ‘90s to strategies for bringing out the added value of destinations (differentiating the product, new public buildings, targeting specific market sectors), and sustainability strategies (rehabilitating natural and cultural assets, evaluating new resources, the design of sustainability programmes [from 1995] and specialization of the sector). Tourism shouldn’t be seen simply as a source of income for the local area but also as a reason for promoting sustainable development, since without effective conservation of its natural and cultural assets, an area will rapidly lose its attractiveness as a tourist destination.

In this context I would like to present three urban planning projects that I have been involved in over the last ten years and which have constituted important advances in the protection of the Catalan coastline: the territorial planning of the municipalities of Lloret de Mar, Mont-roig del Camp and the planning of the eastern sector of the seafront in Palma de Mallorca. But first I would like to describe an interesting counter-proposal for correcting an aggressive coastal transformation, which I developed jointly with the architect Luis Cantallops Valeri as part of the Territorial Planning Document for Tarragona, for which we were awarded the National Urban Planning Prize in 1983.

**The Counter-Proposals to the Planning Document for Cala Mora, Part of the 1983 Territorial Planning Document for Tarragona**

At the beginning of the 1980s we drew up the new Territorial Planning Document for Tarragona. Our planning document opted for a considerable reduction of provision in relation to that of the previous planning document. We were able to declassify and protect some particularly interesting spots along the coast, one of which was an area of some 50 ha.s situated to the east of the municipality and that was earmarked for development. It was a truly extraordinary place, defined by a large pine forest and cliffs which gave it a characteristic silhouette where the mountain met the sea.

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2 Salvador Antón. Doctor in geography, environmental studies and territorial planning, Rovira i Virgili University
Just before the arrival of democracy to Spain, the local planning documents for this area had been approved. These documents, based on the provisions of the 1973 general planning documents for the area, laid out wide roads that were complemented by a dense network of streets with a total length of more than 8 km and street widths of 12 to 18 meters.

When we began working on the new planning document almost 7 km of roads had already been cut through the forest, of which only 660 meters were tarmacked and serviced.

The impact caused by opening this network of streets in the forest was overwhelming. The earth movers had brought large scale destruction to one of the best preserved and most beautiful landscapes of the Catalan coast.

One particularly devastating image has stuck in my mind: the wide esplanade of a street which had been cut through the forest almost on the seafront and the contrast with my car, which looks like a toy by comparison because of the disproportion of that huge bare surface on the point of being paved.

![Fig.4 Images of streets cut through the forest on the seafront.](image)

This disquieting image enables us to imagine what would have been the outcome of the transformation of that area had it followed the lines of the local planning documents in force at the time with the provision of more than 300 lots of between 900 and 1,800 m², with an occupation of 30 to 40 % of the total surface area in terrains with steep gradients. And if, apart from the houses, one took into account the access ramps, swimming pools, patios and private tennis courts that would have been built, the resulting image was disastrous: the almost total destruction of that magnificent pine forest.

After giving the matter some thought and coming back time and again to that image of my car in the middle of that great esplanade, we asked ourselves the question “what would happen if we built the houses on the streets?” The plots are all there, its nearly ready... As soon as we got back to the office we set about confirming whether it was really possible, doing tests with low-rise terraced housing typologies.

Having successfully confirmed the viability of the idea, we formulated the proposal, which consisted in reserving an important swathe of land on the edge of the sea as public green space and reducing the surface area of the streets to be paved and surfaced such that the potential volume of houses that could be built was also reduced in proportion to the reduction in the cost of the street paving and servicing works.

The proposal implied reducing the number of lots to some 15 in number, situated on what had been intended as the streets of the development. In consultation with the developer, one of the country’s largest banks, the modification to the local planning documents to bring them in line with the territorial planning document on which we were working was soon agreed.
Thanks to our proposal, virtually no more trees should have been cut down. The former lots became part of the public green space or privately owned green spaces or came under the joint ownership of various property owners.

And, confident that all had worked out as we had planned it, I continued explaining the case in the Barcelona School of Architecture up until the year 2000. But I was shocked and dismayed to discover that there had been many changes in the course of time and, unfortunately, the provisions for that site had not been exempt. In 1989 a further modification to the local planning documents had been approved which brought them closer to the original proposal we had come up against in 1982, a model with many housing lots and which, with the application of the standard regulation parameters, looks likely to lead to the definitive destruction of the greater part of that once magnificent pine forest.

As a footnote it is worth mentioning that in 1997 the Catalan Government designated a large part of what remains of the natural landscape in the area as a zone of special natural interest and established absolute protection over the public green spaces.

**Territorial Planning of Lloret de Mar: a Change of Model**

Over the last two decades, the tourism sector has been undergoing a period of change caused by, on one hand, a diversification in the motivations of the tourists and, on the other, a growing concern for the social, economic and environmental impacts of tourism.

This behaviour is doubtless part of the current phase of acceleration and intensification of the processes of globalization. It is important to clarify that the phase identified as “the new era of tourism” has not yet substituted nor has it extinguished the Fordist phase characterized by mass tourism, which continues to dominate the sector.

In the current context, and from a geographical point of view, two key processes can be identified which can be understood as manifestations of the spatial generalization of tourist activities and which affect Catalonia and other consolidated “sun and sand” tourist destinations.

a) The process of the internationalization of tourism

b) The process of the “internalization” of tourism, in other words, the spatial extension of tourism throughout the whole territory or the “touristification” of the territory.

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3 Francisco López Palomeque. Professor of Regional Geographical Analysis. Universidad de Barcelona
The new context demands a diversification of the products on offer and a rediscovery of cultural tourism and natural landscape assets.

In the case of Lloret de Mar, the principal destination on the Costa Brava, I had the opportunity to formulate in these terms a qualitative change in relation to previous planning documents.

Lloret de Mar had already begun to revise its planning policies with the intention of directing the town’s economic development towards specializing in tourism services, with an accompanying proposed reduction in the urban density and a view to attracting tourism of a higher quality.

In our territorial planning document for the municipality some extraordinary wildlife spots which had been marked as apt for development in previous planning documents were protected, as is the case of two large sectors on the coast and a sector in the center of Lloret beach, where we proposed a large urban park with a hotel development integrated into the landscape. Another notable proposal successfully protected a magnificent pinewood situated to the west of Fenals beach, between the beach and one of the most beautiful gardens in Catalonia. The wood, some 4 hectares in area, occupied plots of land that had been classified as apt for development and were the property of two well-known estate agents.

Through what is known as a “planning agreement” we managed to get the ownership of the wood passed to the municipality in exchange for lots with an equivalent development potential within the town, in a site on Avenida de Blanes, the western entry point to the town.

We also proposed the creation of a new sports area to include a sports centre and an Olympic-sized covered swimming pool alongside the existing sporting facilities which include an athletics track, thus consolidating a potential attraction for sport tourism as a complement to the current tourism options on offer. A proposal was also made for the creation of a sports university to make full use of the potential of the sports facilities and the existing accommodation in the town, in this way widening the range of activities in the town and avoiding the monoculture of seasonal tourism.

With these measures, together with strengthening local cultural resources, the construction of a new theatre and cultural centre, the consolidation of the top-of-the-range accommodation options, the rehabilitation and upgrading of a golf course integrated into the inland landscape and the revaluation of the interesting architecture and natural landscapes of Lloret, our planning documents acted as a catalyst for changing the tourism model of the town.
The Territorial Planning Documents for Mont-roig del Camp: Planning the Territory of Joan Miró

I had a special motivation for working on the territorial planning documents for Mont-roig del Camp, namely that I had spent long periods of time living there.

What is more, I had been lucky enough to meet and get to know Joan Miró, and in the last years that he spent living in Mont-roig, I would often visit him and talk with him about a wide range of topics.

For Miró, the essence of Catalonia was present in Mont-roig and he changed the way that I felt about and looked at that incredible landscape which he immortalized in his paintings. I used his paintings, in fact, as references in drawing up the objectives for the new planning documents, as allies in formulating the mechanisms for protecting the natural and urban landscapes.

Mont-roig is one of many municipalities that, thanks to earlier planning documents, had the entire length of their coastline under the shadow of imminent development. In the new planning documents for Mont-roig we were able to protect some 5 km of coastline and reduce by half the provision for new housing stock.

As in Lloret de Mar, the local council wanted to upgrade the tourism model in the town by revaluating its natural landscapes, beaches, the environment, its mountains and rural landscapes as well as its agricultural land and local culture. The creation of a cultural centre and a contemporary art centre related to the work of its celebrated local painter, had also been proposed.

This was accompanied by a proposal to renovate the house where Miró had lived as a site of cultural and tourism interest, the same house where Miró had painted the famous painting “La masia”, which was acquired by his personal friend, Ernest Hemingway. We drew up an extensive protection catalogue of buildings of historic and or architectural interest which included Miró’s house and various other buildings in the town as well as the traditional dry stone walled agricultural huts, which, numbering over 100, constitute an element of added value for possible cultural tours of the area in addition to the already established tours of the locations in Miró’s paintings.

I can testify that, following the approval of our planning documents, many of the landscapes which were immortalized by Joan Miró are today protected, as is the case with Mont-roig beach, depicted in the famous painting entitled “Platja de Mont-roig” which, a century on is the same untouched landscape, a landscape that would not have survive had the area been developed in line with the previous planning documents. We can still enjoy that magnificent landscape to this day and hope that it will never change.
In line with the intention of attracting high quality tourism, top of the range hotels were implanted in strategic points in the area. One of the most important golf courses in the country, located nearby, was upgraded and criteria were established for upgrading the existing campsites, almost all of which were of international renown, and one of which had even been redesigned by the architect Alvaro Siza. Siza’s intervention incorporated a sculpture by Frank Gehry representing a cultural portal, ostensibly to the route which included Miro’s house and other places of interest. A long list of collaborators contributed to building a qualitative, “value added” model, the design of which was based on our prize-winning planning document.

Modification to the Eastern Sector of the Seafront at Palma de Mallorca: the Green Corridor on the Coast

In 2008 I participated in drawing up a modification to the planning documents of the Eastern Sector of the Seafront in the city of Palma de Mallorca with the objective of changing the destiny of the coastline which extends from the city walls to the new conference centre.

The sector in question is a narrow lot some 500 m long, situated right on the seafront. It was earmarked for imminent development with the construction of seven storey apartment blocks with a total floor area of 60,000 m² above street level.

The process of getting the planning modification approved turned out to be a marathon task. We had to use a highly complex legal manoeuvre because of the situation in which the city found itself at that moment. Meanwhile, the latest draft of the Mallorcan planning guidelines which was being written at the time put a limit on the quantity of new housing and we had to adapt our provisions to its very tight growth predictions. Achieving our objective proved to be a very difficult task. We also came up against resistance in the local administration, not to mention the owner of the land in question who had connections with some of the largest estate agents in Spain. One of them had already submitted a development proposal, the terrible outcome of which – had it come to fruition – would have been a wall of cement formed of high-rise blocks that would have robbed an important quarter of the city of its sea views.
We decided to design the area for the benefit of all the citizens, creating a public park containing public buildings and relocating the development potential of the property owners to a site just behind the seafront using a mechanism very similar to that we had used to save the pinewood in Lloret de Mar. The project represented a different way of understanding the city, an alternative to the brutal high-rise seafront so common in our coastal cities.

At the same time we placed an obligation on ourselves to generate city architecture, independently of the architecture of the local buildings, based on the shape of the terrain and studies of the cross section of the city and the relationships between the coastline and the compact city.

The proposal incorporates light constructions with trapezoidal forms into the park to house public and institutional programmes.

A criticism of the proposal could be levelled at the retention of a building of eleven storeys that, despite its limited architectural interest, had been listed the previous year. But it is also true that it was thanks to the preservation of this building that we were able to propose the planning modification for the eastern sector of the seafront since the earlier planning documents were invalidated by their failure to preserve this now listed building.

At the end of a long and difficult process of spreading awareness of the issue in the collective consciousness through presentations, debates and public meetings, our proposal eventually gained public support and was finally approved. Today the City of Palma has the potential for a public park with public buildings alongside the beach and we are immensely satisfied to have contributed to a work of such great public interest and social importance but also in having led a change of model towards a more sustainable, functionally integrated and environmentally efficient city.

Our proposal was included in the exhibition “Una ciudad llamada España” celebrated in the National Gallery in Athens from May to October, 2010 and in the Central House of Artists en Moscow, from May to July, 2011.
References


