The mirage of residential tourism
A mistaken concept, form arguments

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Abstract

Is it possible for a territory receiving four million foreign visitors a year and having more than a million touristic houses not to be touristic? “Sun & Beach” tourism is often related to what is known as residential tourism, a modality based on the slow rotation of touristic beds. However, the touristic nature of this modality, is an ongoing debate since the economical profits for the destination region are not based on services but on real estate business. This article argues from the point of view of architectural and urban form, that residential tourism is not a touristic activity. To that end, it studies the Spanish “Costa Blanca” an area specialized in accommodating the long-term tourist. It analyzes the shift in concept of four main themes (house, building, city and environment), from the leisure-focused urban plans that started colonizing the land to the actual built reality.

Keywords: residential tourism, Costa Blanca, form analysis.

1. About Tourism and Residence

Over the past 50 years, tourism has changed Spain. After the end of World War II, the leisure-focused industry became one of the fastest growing economic sectors. Once Spain came out of the period of autarchy in the aftermath of its civil war (1936-1939), the government undertook a series of reforms in the economic policies that would allow an structural shift in the economy of much of its territory. This shift was based on the production of leisure spaces as economical role (Vera Rebollo, 1987). From then on, the coastal areas became the most dynamic actors in the formation of urban land. The main reason for this process was to increase the accommodation capacity for holiday periods.

But the concept of tourism encompasses a wide range of activities that generate incomes from very different processes. Within the category of “Sun & Beach” mass tourism affecting Spanish coastline, it is possible to distinguish different models of exploitations in which users are guided by opposing wills. The transformation of the coastline will not be then homogeneous since the massive presence of different idle consumers will derive in specific adaptations to satisfy their needs.

On the one hand, the traditional model of touristic exploitation comprises all processes, goods and services related to travelling, and is based in fast rotation accommodations. The control of accommodation (in hotels, camping sites or resorts) allows the possibility of managing users’ different activities (catering, entertainment, shopping,…), their itineraries and their time to obtain the maximum economic return from their stay. This implies an optimization process that can be assimilated to the industrial logic. As a result an intense touristic model is created based on the accumulation of attractions and activities in a continuous time sequence.

Bearing that in mind, the concept of “residential tourism” comprises a diverse reality within, the main characteristic of which is that the stay occurs in non-dynamic accommodations, long-term rents or owned properties, in short, a second home.

While travelling to a new environment involves experiencing new landscapes and different lifestyles that take the tourist away from his daily routine, opting for a second home means to stop this process
in a geographic location, where the user may generate a new routine, complementary to the previous one. Production routine turns into consumption routine.

Since the introduction of “residential tourism” in 1979 by the Spanish sociologist Francisco Jurdao, this term has been used by various researchers in an attempt to define an ambiguous set of economic and migratory activities. This term has caught on the local society from the host areas. However, both what is understood by “residential tourism” and the touristic nature of these activities are an ongoing debate. The academic definition of this concept has been approached mainly sociologically and economically.

From the sociological approach, scholars define the touristic-residential process attending to its characters, taking into account the activities and habits which differentiate users (hypothetical tourists) from members of the host society.

Among the users recognized as representative of “residential tourism” two basic groups can be distinguished. Firstly, the holidaymakers, people who travel during their holiday period to an apartment located in a touristic area. This seasonal leisure time, aimed at the recovery of the workforce, was gained as a right for the majority of western society thanks to the social advances in the first half of 20th century.

Secondly, a more heterogeneous group, made up by users involved in a new kind of migratory movement, climatic amenity migrations, in which wealthy citizens move to better weathered geographical areas, to establish a new home, a new social network and a new lifestyle at a non-productive stage of their lives.

Regarding this approach, the key question should not be whether the activities and habits of these residential tourists are different from those of the locals, but whether these activities can be considered as touristic.

From an economic perspective, residential tourism is defined by the kind of supply consumed by the tourist. As defined by Tomás Mazón and Antonio Aledo: “residential tourism is the economic activity focused on the development, construction and sale of housing that conform the extra-hotel sector, used by its owners as a holiday accommodation or residence, either permanently or semi-permanently, away from their usual accommodation, responding to new forms of mobility in advanced societies”. The touristic status of the whole process would be determined by whether the good consumed, the housing, is actually touristic. However, according to other scholars this condition would become completely ambiguous. As stated by Callejo et al. (2004) “it is the meaning and use given to a house, and not its location or the uniqueness of the construction, what defines it as potentially touristic. In this sense, it is worth saying that, objectively, all private houses can be considered touristic, even if only their users can give them this role”.

It is precisely this statement that this paper argues. Unlike other kind of tourism, “Sun and beach” tourism is an activity based on the search of a physical stimulation. According to Rosa Barba and Ricard Pié (1996), tourism is an activity fed by the possibility of experiencing landscape, different ways of life and culture. Even though any house can be exploited as a temporary accommodation, the competitiveness of a touristic area will be based upon the spatial difference (Vera Galván, 1989) and the environmental quality that it may offer (Vera Rebollo, 1996). That is why the urbanization of the touristic territory has to respect those principles to avoid destroying its primary object of attraction. From this point of view, residential tourism, understood as the set of activities allowing sedentary and long idle stay for a large amount of population, could be considered a touristic reality if the form that it builds is specific for the development of a lifestyle based on nature and leisure time enjoyment. The aim of this paper is to provide arguments for the debate about whether residential tourism belongs to the realm of tourism by means of a study of built form. This research belongs to the discipline of architecture and urban planning, based on the formal analysis of the proposals for the construction of touristic areas for long-term stays.
To develop this research, I have studied a portion of the Spanish coastline, between Cape Nao and Cape Palos, in the regions of Alicante and Murcia. 55 million visitors a year make Spain the world’s main destination for “Sun & Beach” tourism. Approximately 4 millions of those head to the “Costa Blanca”. Adding 15 million tourists from the Spanish internal market, the South-East of the Iberian peninsula becomes one of the main European destinations. But this area, strongly developed since the late 1950’s, and containing about 1 million houses considered as touristic, stands out for one reason: with the exception of Benidorm, it nearly has no hotels. Since its origin as touristic this territory chose for an exploitation of leisure periods based on long-term stays. This fact makes this 200 kilometres of coastline a nearly pure object of study for understanding the form that this kind of leisure builds.

2. A Model for Long-Term Tourism

At the time of its appearance, the holiday town had no form. The will to respond to the demand for a space for prolonged leisure for a big amount of population caused the need for a program, starting a search that lasted for the first fifteen years of the Spanish touristic boom. Until the arrival of the first crisis in the sector in the mid seventies, the optimism its relentless growth generated attracted to this quest investors who wanted to take advantage of this new business opportunity, but the investigation was led by the architects who were to formalize this new object. Given the lack of valid references for the new dimension of the touristic phenomenon, these architects enjoyed great freedom to propose, resulting in a vast variety of projects and works.

The geographical and cultural peripheral condition affecting south-eastern Spain during the 1950s and 1960s allowed however the emergence of proposals from very different spheres. In the geographical area studied, lots of plans for touristic urbanization were approved before 1975. To understand the specificity of the holiday town that was to be built, amongst the 24 plans that I gathered, I selected nine of special interest from which I will try to extract the common characteristics that may define the essential form of this kind of territory.

The selection criteria are multiple. Two well-known Catalan architects, from different generations, made the plans that can be considered as the beginning and the end of this researching period. The project for La Manga del Mar Menor, started by Antonio Bonet in 1961, means the arrival of the direct influence of the first CIAM congresses, where leisure territory is envisaged as an urban infrastructure for the enjoyment and relax of industrialized society. This territory is closely related to the functional city that it complements. Against this proposal La Manzanera, created by Ricardo Bofill’s “Taller de Arquitectura”, reveals the crisis of the orthodox modern ideology, seeking to retrieve lost values from the traditional ways of building urban space. Playa de San Juan, with its 900 hectares of surface, is the biggest piece of land projected through a single plan, conceived by Juan Guardiola Gaya. Santa Pola del Este, Campoamor and La Zenia, where the only three projects in Alicante designated by the Spanish Ministry of Tourism as Touristic Centers of National Interest (CITN). Finally, Urbanova and La Cala are two examples that show the touristic work of Juan Antonio García Solera, a main actor in the renewal of Alicante’s architecture.

These projects share the aim of creating a real “residential city for relax”, essentially different of the intense and frenetic touristic city of which Benidorm is the best example. The reading of these proposals gives a specific idea of how a long stay tourism territory should be. This can be defined by the relation of four elements: house, building, city and environment.
House. Accommodation unit adapted to lodge the tourist during their long holiday period.

In 1929, the second CIAM congress, held in Frankfurt, tried to establish universal rules that would guarantee a decent house for everyone, defining the “existenz minimum” of housing in the industrial city. But housing for tourism implies different needs. In the same way that tourism transformed the typology of urban hotels to create the panoramic hotel, dealing with the issue of housing units, the projects for massive tourism take liberties not suitable for a stable residence, producing a form that forces a different way of living.

Holidays are a brief time spent while enjoying a mild climate and a certain condition of anonymity that allows the user to reduce the need for privacy. Taken to an extreme, the house becomes a minimum dark shelter that keeps the most intimate acts inside it leaving the rest of them out. As if they were a colony of caravans rooted to the ground, the Malaret apartments built by Bonet in La Manga offer a shadow and the sea breeze as the whole comfort needed to spend the day. Life is exposed to the look of others or it is even shared with them, as Bofill proposes in La Manzanera’s Red Wall, where the courtyards and corners created by the apartments provide the lacking space.

Given the great importance of outside spaces, apartments in high buildings expand their balconies, treated as real open rooms, as much as possible. To that end, the inner rooms are compressed in a way that their functions for daytime and night time are overlapped. Juan Antonio García Solera carried out an interesting typological research in the series of apartment buildings that he projected for a truly touristic market. The housing type developed in his early project Maralic I shows all of his intentions: the access happens through a wide open corridor, totally exposed to the weather, gaining space from the houses to become a place for interaction with neighbours. The interior layout extends the hotel typology to allow all the uses needed in a house, overlapped in a single space to which a large balcony able to house as many functions as the inside is added. The housing typologies in Maralic III and Cervantes Building in Benidorm soften this radical proposal keeping the essential aspects for summer lifestyle. A different trial was run at the Raspeig B apartments, solved with a duplex typology. One of the floors is composed as a conventional house. The other one is planned for accessing the houses and gives a unique summertime spaces totally open to the climate and cohabitation with neighbours. This exposure to the external conditions and the flexibility of use in the inner and outer rooms characterizes the holiday house.

Figure 1: Housing typologies in Juan Antonio García Solera’s work.
**Building**. Sum of housing units and private or communal open spaces that form the tourist’s own residential complex.

In the touristic projects the main aim attending to residential buildings is the enjoyment of the surrounding environment. Depending on the size of the buildings two different strategies are proposed: becoming part of the landscape or rising up to contemplate it.

For single-family houses the aim is to disappear in nature. Bonet imports this idea from his previous experience urbanizing Punta Ballena, an exclusive holiday resort in Uruguay. There he used a density of three houses per hectare, blurring the parcels boundaries in the existing vegetation. His first intentions for La Manga were to set out a series of dense cores of activity separated by housing areas with an even lower density, with parcel surfaces around 5000 square meters. This model will also be adopted by García Solera in his proposal for La Cala in Villajoyosa.

Bofill’s project La Manzanera adapts this approach considering that the valuable landscape is not only the one previously existing but the one that the housing complex itself will create by “conserving the spirit of the place and deepening into it”. He proposes a set of rules that every building must follow to cooperate in shaping the image of the place. This allows a division of land into much smaller plots, around twenty houses per hectare.

The multifamily building enjoy their environment by looking at it. The houses pile up seeking for the best views and sun. At the same time, they leave as much space as possible on the ground seeking the balance between the fluidity of space (to avoid interrupting the overall impression of landscape) and delimiting areas for complementary uses such as sports, entertainment or private gardens.

Within the general rule of seeking the highest buildable area with the minimum occupation, a distinction would appear between the buildings thought for looking and those thought to be looked at. In the first case, laminar typologies are built, for instance in Santa Pola del Este or La Cala. Despite its large dimension these buildings try to reduce their impact on the landscape by being located away from each other or adapting to the topography of the place. The second option is that where high buildings try to order the landscape, like the vertical rhythm given by the towers to a totally flat territory in La Manga, or the urban fabric, like the landmark buildings in Playa de San Juan that try to emphasize an abstract urban plan. Here hierarchy has been inverted so that the buildings contain open space, valuable due to its potential use.

![Figure 2: High building typologies](image)
City. Place built gathering all the functions needed for leisure periods.

Holidays are an exceptional season of the year but, in order to accomplish the role that contemporary society has given them as periods for recovering the workforce, they must be long enough to meet the combination of several aspects: contemplative relax is joined by a variety of entertainment activities. Leisure territories have a sense as production centres for pleasure and entertainment, both physical, with activities related to welfare, sport practice or seeking new sensations, and intellectual with the enjoyment of a unique landscape or culture or the supply of shows.

The projects analysed are based on residential building, but complementary uses have an important presence. All kind of equipments may be found in the studied cases (bullrings, football fields, riding schools, theatres, cinemas, marinas, golf courses, churches, sports clubs,...) in addition to bars, restaurants, discos and shops. As zoning was a common trend at the time were these plans were written, many cases (like the group of CITN or La Cala) tend to concentrate non-residential uses to generate activity cores, true leisure production centres that multiply the offer while keeping a distance to protect the quieter residential areas from noises and troubles. This cores are displayed either as civic centres, surrounding an open central space, or as linear itineraries.

Although hotels are minor elements in these plans their role is also important, since they increase the offer of services for the complex and also introduce new users with a higher spending rhythm. Hotels are proposed to respond diverse demands, what implies a different location within the general layout. Those aimed to clients looking for a relaxed stay are located in the highest spots of the plot (for instance, La Manzanera or La Cala) whereas others take profit of more active areas like beaches or commercial zones (Santa Pola, La Zenia,...) Some others work more independently linked to large sport facilities such as golf courses or marinas.

A different approach to increase the activities offered is the construction of “Villages” complexes that base their morphology in the forms of popular architecture (compact, twisted, based on opening squares and courtyards surrounded by buildings as high as three storeys...). This “traditional” villages concentrate many different functions, even residential, to achieve the “atmosphere” of traditional public spaces, looking for the “contact between people” and “avoiding the feelings of solitude and isolation”. This concept is taken by Ricardo Bofill as the main guide to build the whole “Manzanera” estate, rejecting the rules of functional zoning inherited from orthodox modern planning.

The diversity of uses is necessary in touristic projects.

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Table 1: Land surfaces occupied by different uses (percentage). *Part of the open space in La Cala is occupied by single-family dwellings in a very low density. ** The whole complex of La Cala can be considered as a Village. ***This open space percentage includes surface for sports equipments.
**Environment.** Primary reason for the touristic travel, a unique place that offers exceptional conditions (natural or cultural), beyond the tourist everyday life.

The aim of travelling for a “Sun & Beach” tourist is knowing and enjoying a different place with mild climate and different from his everyday environment. The location of buildings and uses in this space and the movements within it must attend to its uniqueness.

In these projects, the abundance of open space is basic, depending on its size and location it carries out diverse duties. The 10% percent required in Spain by law since 1956 for every urban development is insufficient to satisfy the needs. The main space is the beach and the seafront. Landscape integration demands large surface of land to keep enough distance between buildings to allow a comprehensive view of the natural environment. The large dimension of sports facilities means an opportunity to reinforce the qualities of landscape. La Cala works as a perfect example of how the construction of an artificial marina inland and the location of a golf course in the less profitable fields of the plot can increase the value of the whole complex. Also the construction of artificial islands used as ports in La Manga or the transformation of a cliff in La Manzanera to locate communal uses and saltwater pools, show this capacity of creating a new landscape.

Moreover, different uses are located to highlight existing geographic features. The first project for La Manga, tried to enable understanding the shape of the land by the rhythmic arrangement of blocks perpendicular to the coast, in addition to locating the main attractions in the most distinctive geographical spots. Santa Pola del Este also locates its “Spanish Village” as a landmark in the top of the cliff and sets a building typology based on allowing the contemplation of landscape. La Cala tries to improve visually its environment, even an abstract plan as Playa de San Juan displays its zoning attending mainly to topography.

Also the road network is designed with the aim of offering an aesthetic joy along the journey. The winding paths are adapted to topography, searching the panoramic views and reducing speed and the influence of vehicles in an area thought for relaxing. At the same time pedestrian paths, isolated from traffic, are displayed to allow the most of movements. Beyond its usefulness, the elements of urbanization are designed to maintain the overall logic of the set and help building a complete environment.

In short, the analysis of these proposals shows the possibility of a leisure-focused territory composed by specific houses for temporary use, grouped in complexes displayed to enjoy a landscape that contains a variety of equipments for entertainment, located to reinforce the inherent values of the land they use.

![Figure 3: Proposals for a residential-touristic environment. “Santa Pola del Este” (1964) and “La Cala” (1975).](image-url)
3. From Exception to Comfort: A Non-Touristic Territory

The economic crisis resulting from the 1973 oil crisis led to a radical slow-down of the tourism industry as well as of the real estate sector. We could consider that this moment ended the first period of experimentation in touristic urban fabric.

Large unitary real estate developments were interrupted and a real estate business based on the promotion of small plots was adopted. That is the way original principles were gradually altered and new activities adopted more and more neutral characteristics.

The house for touristic environments is standardized, opting for typological solutions according to commercial criteria based on selling as many rooms strictly adjusted to standards habitability requirements and reducing the percentage of exterior surface. The uniqueness of the touristic typology gives way to the comfortableness established by law. The alleged touristic character is from then on determined very often by exotic exterior ornamentation in buildings.

Touristic residential buildings abandoned extremes. The very low density integrated into the landscape is rejected due to low exploitation, while muty-family buildings, which were proposed as high buildings offering views, reduce their height maintaining the housing density by multiplying the occupation of the land to reduce construction costs. By reducing the surface of open space areas, limited to a surface sufficient to contain a swimming pool, collective property management is simplified and maintenance costs are reduced.

The residential resort loses its functional complexity by removing most of the non-residential program. Function moves from the production of entertainment, with unique leisure activities, to the minimum offer to allow the stay. Satellite TV, beer and international press constitute sufficient infrastructure for the passing of time.

The relationship with the natural environment is also damaged because, having lost all other attributes, the only valuable resource is now the ground regardless of its specific location (except for those with beachfront). This fact implies search for maximum exploitation and increases the urbanized area. Increased density and occupation, together with the loss of autonomy of settlements (due to the lack of complementary uses), favors speed of movement instead of aesthetic enjoyment of the journey.

Studies show a trend to the neutralization of touristic characteristics in view of the total surface destined for each use.

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Table 2: Evolution of land surfaces occupied by different uses from the original plan to actual built reality (percentage).
Construction along Alicante and Murcia’s coast line, one of the main residential tourism destinations, shows how at the beginning of massive tourism exploitation, there was a will to generate a Sand and Beach model with specific features for leisure different from intensive destinations based on hotel exploitation. As argued, if we accept that a touristic environment is a unique space capable of attracting users willing to experiment a lifestyle different from the ordinary one based on spare time enjoyment, the construction of this territory could be considered a touristic fact. However this model was not respected and an urbanized territory was consequently built which cannot be considered as touristic due to its physical morphology. As it consolidates, this model loses the conditions which make it unique.

These arguments only expose the confusion produced between a touristic territory and the accumulation of second dwellings for seasonal use. It might be possible to equip a territory for non intensive economically viable tourism as a complement to other activities without transforming its essence, but in southeastern Spain this model did not succeed. Instead, it has become densified, it has increased its permanent population, has been equipped with big transportation infrastructures and metropolitan equipments, building a dense non touristic territory. This construction has yielded wealth and brought along new conditions which could be considered as potentialities for the future development of the region, but the identity and function of this future will not be a virgin beach by the Mediterranean.

References


