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Costa Blanca: Public Space And Perceived Image as Key to Tourism Competitiveness

Costa Blanca: espacio público e imagen percibida como clave de competitividad turística

コスタ・ブランカ：観光競争力強化の鍵としての公共空間と知覚イメージ

Rosario Navalón | ロサリオ・ナバルオン

Los destinos turísticos tradicionales del litoral español se enfrentan a profundas transformaciones debidas a varios factores, entre los que se encuentran cambios notables en el comportamiento de la demanda y un intenso crecimiento de la competencia a todos los niveles, que puede poner en duda la pervivencia del modelo de desarrollo de estas áreas maduras. Lejos de ser una excepción, la situación que se describe para la Costa Blanca es extrapolable a otros destinos turísticos en otras regiones y en ámbitos urbanos, que se enfrentan al reto de incorporar nuevas estrategias de renovación, diversificación y reestructuración de su tejido urbano y turístico, como clave de reorientación de su ciclo de vida.

A partir del estudio del caso de la Costa Blanca, pero con una vocación globalizadora, se tratan a continuación argumentos referidos a los cambios en la demanda turística y de ocio cotidiano, y cómo ello afecta a la necesidad de intervenir de un modo distinto en el diseño y gestión del tejido urbano que perciben los visitantes y residentes. Se percibe de forma clara que se ha de trabajar de un modo distinto tanto la escena urbana como el territorio turístico a partir de la potenciación de valores diferenciadores: por una adecuada intervención urbanística en los espacios públicos con acciones capaces de distinguir al destino de sus competidores, por la incorporación de nuevos elementos de atracción e innovación urbana, o por una gestión más eficiente de los servicios y las funciones urbanas de los destinos turísticos.

A partir de varios indicadores se demuestra que la competitividad de los destinos tradicionales, sean áreas costeras o ciudades, ya no sólo reside en sus recursos patrimoniales, litorales o climáticos, sino que su valor diferenciador se vincula también a la calidad urbana percibida y a la capacidad de incorporar en las acciones de futuro las nuevas necesidades de residentes y visitantes, cada vez más exigentes e impredecibles.

スペイン沿岸部に点在する伝統的な保養地はいま、重大な岐路に立たされている。需要行動の明白な変化や競合他者のあらゆるレベルでの急成長など、さまざまな要因によって、これらの成熟した行楽地の成長モデルが存続の危機にさらされているからだ。本論でとりあげるアリカンテの保養地の状況というのは決して例外的事例ではなく、他の地方の行楽地や都市型の観光地についても当てはまる。いずれの地域も、そのライフサイクルのあり方を転換する足掛かりとして、都市構造や観光機構を刷新・多様化・再構築する新戦略の策定という難題に取り組んでいるからだ。

本論は、ケース・スタディとしてコスタ・ブランカを扱いつつも、観光需要や日常的余暇活動の変化について、グローバルな展望を射程に入れながら考察する。またこうした変化を受けて、訪問者と住民が日々知覚している都市構造のデザインとマネジメントに対して、これまでとはどう異なったかたちで取り組む必要性が生じているかについても論じる。論中では、都市域においても、またツーリス

ムの領域においても、従来とは異なった地域運営のあり方が求められていることが明らかとなる。すなわち、公共空間に対して適切な都市整備を実施すること、人を惹きつけ都市構造を刷新するような新たな要素を積極的に取り入れていくこと、あるいは観光地の都市サービスや機能をより効率的に運営すること等により、当該地域を競合する他地域から差別化することが、ますます重視されるようになってきているのである。

さまざまな指標が示しているように、沿岸部であれ都市部であれ、伝統的保養地の競争力が、もはや歴史的遺産・海岸・気候という資源だけに存するのではないことは明白である。これらの観光地を差別化する価値は、知覚される都市の質と深い関わりを持っており、また日増しに水準が上がりますますます予測不能になっている訪問者と住民の新しいニーズを汲み取り、それを今後の活動に組み込んでいく能力にも関係しているのである。



fig. 1: Sprawl in urban planning for tourism is a generalized reality in the Costa Blanca region. It imprints a commonplace and undifferentiated character on the destination, which barely highlights the cultural and natural values the region enjoys. Panorama of the town of Calp. Photograph: R. Navalón 2013.

The context for reflection: urban actions in mature tourist destinations

A conscientious reflection on the image of cities in tourist areas must inevitably be based on tourism as a global activity that moves millions of people from all over the world, from urban and industrial settings to places with different appealing resources (those associated with relaxation, culture, nature, or other material or immaterial attractions). Nevertheless, a central characteristic of tourist cities lies in the climate differences with respect to the origin of the traveler. This is seen the world over, from the outbound tourist or source region to the periphery (Gormsen 1997:43). In fact, numerous texts cite similarities between tourist cities, beachfront vacation areas or tourist complexes from one continent to another. This is the interpretive key to understanding that the processes which will be described below, referring to the destinations on the Spanish Costa Blanca, imitate in one way or another other tourist areas which follow a model centered on the product of "sun and beach".

The tourist brand Costa Blanca encompasses the entire region of the province of Alicante, including not only the coastal townships but also those in the interior. This designation, nevertheless, due to its very name and to the efforts undertaken to promote it, is primarily associated with the region situated on the coast and with the development of products focused on

the resources of sea and climate. In other words, it is focused almost exclusively on the product of sun and beach. Furthermore, such a static and bare bones image of a region that is really quite diverse focuses tourism activities and their effects on a narrow, coastal strip and mid-range, markedly residential accommodations. We find a predominance of such dwellings for use in tourism dispersed throughout the region, stretching as well into the bordering towns not located on the coast. This fact has marked (and handicapped) the region's external image as an undifferentiated residential space of sun and beach and conditions its competitive capacity and its future economic profitability, making it excessively dependent on the fluctuations of the real estate market and on the building and sales strategies of residential units for tourism.

It seems evident that these dynamic forces of extensive construction growth, conceived from the myopic point of view of mono-production, present clear weaknesses for future viability and represent as well a potential source of conflict from environmental, economic and social perspectives. Nevertheless, until the global economic crisis brought to light threats to the system underlying this model of real estate construction, it was not considered important to define new lines of involvement which would contribute to redesigning the image of the destination, diversifying the business base, and indicating how the destination differed from its competitors (Navalón, Rico 2012: 326).

The restructuring of mature seaside destinations is considered a necessity in view of the profound transformations in the European tourism market and the intense growth in competition at all levels. This situation has severely affected the model of development on the Spanish coast, accelerating the natural process of loss of competitiveness associated with the cycle of tourism destinations after more than 40 years of tourism activity (Perelli 2012).

In the same vein, numerous authors (Antón, Navarro, Perelli, Rullán, Vera, among others) indicate that a large number of the Spanish seaside destinations are gradually incorporating strategies of diversification in their offerings and in the reorientation or change of their promotional images, adding other products and services apart from the primary ones, sun and sand. Logically, however, these actions will essentially signify a reach beyond marketing and will have to be accompanied by a treatment of the urban fabrics generated by tourism and by the preexisting urban spaces.

In our opinion, the recovery of traditional urban centers, those that constituted the initial kernel for tourism in the first phase of development, but which were slowly relegated to an inferior status in the process of developing extensive new accommodations, needs to retake center stage, beginning with deliberate measures, in order to become a potential and unique element within mature destinations.

With this common context and comprehensive inclination as a starting point, we will focus this essay on several arguments referring principally to the Costa Blanca. They may, however, be extrapolated to any region. These arguments stem basically from three main concepts (Lois 2008:24): the changes in motivations and habits of consumption in the demand for tourism; the search for unique features, beginning with the incorporation of local resources and the involvement of the city; and the importance of the attitudes and decisions of the people who make decisions regarding tourism, both public and private, and who consolidate through their decisions and actions the form and function of the region where tourists and residents converge.

Global changes in the demand for tourism that merit response

More than half a century has passed since the birth of democratic tourism affected the middle classes. Since then, tourists have acquired experience and assurance in traveling autonomously and in gathering information. This has permitted them not only to choose destinations based on personal motivations, but has also made them more demanding when it comes to the quality/price relationship. These circumstances, together with the ease of travel due to new airline companies and more extensive use of

information technologies in the consumer society of the source markets, contribute to much more unpredictable and autonomous behavior when it comes to demand. And this behavior does not necessarily involve tourism operators, who are gradually being displaced by travel arrangements made by the individual.

In recent years it is the tourist who decides what he wants to do: relax by the seaside, in the countryside or in nature, practice sports, visit cities, or engage in cultural activities. Depending on his preferences, he selects the tourist destination best adapted to his needs. This fact compels the mature sun and beach destinations, anchored in the stereotypical image of a traditional offer centered on climate and proximity to the seashore, to reformulate their marketing strategies if they wish to continue being attractive and competitive in a hugely dynamic global market.

Some authors have analyzed these changes as an evolution in tourism, which they describe as moving from "Fordism" to "post-Fordism". The first phase started in the 1950s, and put simply it is seen as the development of the "tourism industry", one that enhances the processes of production and use of tourism in order to offer standardized vacation experiences. This approach of optimizing the organizing system standardizes not only the processes of tourism services in the different sectors but also replicates vacation destinations so they appear to have similar characteristics. The principal characteristic of post-Fordism tourism is the need to show itself as an alternative to Fordist tourism, and the factor that singles this out is the response of tourist demand versus standardization (Donaire 2008). This is a radical change which affects the very heart of the structure of the tourism experience; in spite of the fact that it questions the mass use of traditional destinations, in no way is it inconsistent with the irrepressible increase in the number of tourists worldwide.

At the root of this change we find new types of relationships, which arise due to the growing availability of free time. This is supplemented by the idea referred to by some authors as the *cultural turn*, which synthesizes one of the key characteristics of the post-modern era: the commercialization of time, culture and life experiences (Rifkin 2000). Within this social context, it is not odd that the use of cultural production by a social majority captures the attention of public strategies in economically favorable circumstances. This in turn is translated into the multiplication of cultural possibilities for a society in search of new knowledge and experiences. Thus, citizens in general have more free time, possess a higher level of education and cultural foundation with respect to past generations, which allows them to enjoy in large measure the new possibilities of cultural consumption.

In addition, this experienced and educated tourist also reveals changes in his preference and modifies his behavior, indicating a greater sensitivity toward services

focused on authenticity and respect for the resources of heritage sites, whether they are natural or cultural. All this is in accordance with global societal tendencies that demonstrate a greater sensitivity toward sustainability and toward a better environmental management in natural and/or urban spheres.

The new tourist, like the citizen who makes the most of his free time, seeks to enjoy new sensations and to get to know and understand the resources of the cultural heritage found in his home environment or in the places to which he travels. This is accomplished through an understanding of the characteristics, the role, the essence or history of the place. What happens, then, is that this type of cultural experience, engaged in alone or with others, ends up defining the most essential part of the leisure and tourism experience. It is capable of generating a deep satisfaction, in which the consumer-tourist ultimately encounters practicality in his free time and in what he purchases. It can be said that this type of occurrence becomes the center and the objective of leisure and of the trip, and it culminates in constituting a necessity which one will not readily give up (Navalón 2013).

Worldwide, there is talk about an ever more active and selective demand that, nevertheless, doesn't overlook any of the options regarding tourism services. Also, in the tourism destinations along the coast, demand is unpredictable. People might seek out on the same day sun, beach, leisure activities or cultural tourism. Considering motivation, then, we can talk about a new hybrid tourist-consumer. On any given trip, these motivations can meld into more heterogeneous types of consumption, contributing to a complex, competitive touristic panorama. In turn, this can contribute to decline in areas that are not ready to take on the challenge of diversification and differentiation that the demand entails.

The increase in free time in the tourist's place of origin has contributed to the dissolution between the practices of cultural consumption and daily entertainment. Thus, the greater or lesser capacity of tourism areas to satisfy the demands of visitors who are accustomed to consuming products of leisure in their places of residence determines the ability of the destinations to compete. For that, we consider it important to accept as well the dual nature of the use of cities and tourist destinations, as much from the visitors' point of view as from the residents'.

Measures for diversification and differentiation in the urban centers of tourism destinations

As a response to the above, it is logical to propose strategies to diversify the offerings in the different tourism destinations and cities where regional tourism consumption occurs. For that, new products are generated. They are based on the incorporation of resources and services that

are attractive to this new demand, and which furthermore are able to extend the period of consumption beyond the traditional high season, focused on summer, the holidays of Holy Week and Christmas, or long holiday weekends.

This challenge then compels us to reflect upon each and every one of the elements which makes up the value chain of the tourist product, and from that point on, the plan of strategic action that will affect the tourism destination and possibly even the urban structure as a whole. The answer can lead us to propose actions for the restructuring of the configuration of the destination itself, oriented toward the same sector of the market; or to the proposal of operations of diversification that entail the enlargement of the portfolio of products; or to the development of operations that seek differentiation, in which unique attributes of the location are highlighted, or to incorporating actions capable of distinguishing the destination from its competitors, whether it be with temporary operations or with prominent architectural or urban projects.

As mentioned earlier when we referred to the behavior of the tourist consumer and of the resident, many different forms and developments can occur in relation to tourism and the cities where tourism is found. It is apparent that today we cannot talk about urban or cultural tourism by referring solely to the large European capitals of the Grand Tour. Tourism in urban spaces offers a multitude of opportunities based on the characteristics of the cities themselves and on the type of tourists they attract (Antón 2008:54). It can be thought provoking to reflect on the city and on tourism in traditional coastal tourism destinations from a variety of perspectives.

Keeping the changes in demand in mind, we can understand the gradual incorporation of "the touristic" in urban planning actions in public spaces of mid-sized cities and of traditional centers of mature tourist destinations. In some cases elements linked to culture which until now have been for the most part neglected, are transformed or adjusted for specific sectors of demand. These might include useful images that adopt a secondary role in order to develop other purposes, in an attempt to better the image of the urban scene and be more attractive to the visitor.

In this way, we can find different types of *actions in the traditional offerings linked to local heritage*, without entailing direct action on cultural heritage sites (even though indirect action may contribute to its conservation). Some such cases could be:

- Heritage sites, which in the destinations of the Costa Blanca do not have enough individual importance to justify tourists traveling to them, are superficially renovated as attractions to generate services that satisfy the motivation of seeking "genuine experiences" tied to the local culture, starting with different strategies of promotion of the heritage sites.
- The stereotype of tourism, identifiable with the local

attributes of the Mediterranean coast, is transformed into the possibility of getting to know the unique and thriving “true local lifestyles”.

- Beyond the possible relevance of the unique resources of heritage sites, which are not especially outstanding in this area, one looks for the historic essence of the place, often starting with cultural expressions of the local atmosphere, festivities or local events. Again, these do not include direct involvement with architectural or urban elements.

The urban and architectural heritage and local culture can be stimulated as complementary attractions to the principal product of the coast, starting with the recovery and stimulation of their functional, cultural and urban essence and with various means of architectural and urban involvement. This would also include, nevertheless, the incorporation of adequate descriptive planning, for which one could propose a project of effective communication with the objective of conveying the true meaning of the elements for the visitor, beginning with different means and techniques of tangible or intangible interpretation of the heritage sites.

Unfortunately, in many cases this action of restoration of architectural and urban planning heritage sites involves only the surface of the sites. We see this with projects dedicated to cleaning and reinforcing structures, or in the worst case with a reinterpretation of their original function and an alteration of their identity. That would not achieve a recovery of the local identity, the “why” of the elements, which could restore in an effective fashion a unique and distinguishing resource, one interwoven with culture and history, even if recent. Reality is different, and on many occasions in tourism centers and around heritage sites the incorporation of services and cultural products linked to leisure and recreation (including shopping, night life, street life or gastronomy) is limited, and what is promoted is the cultural consumption itself as a diversifying attraction in the tourism experience in that destination. This does not necessarily imply a reflection regarding the viability and durability of the proposals, but on many occasions it does not even regard an assessment of the suitability of such proposals.

To the best of our understanding, before taking any action, a study of the recognition of the history and function of the site should take place, out of respect for the local identity and the resources in which the essence of these places is found. If we do not follow this procedure, we run the risk of trivializing the heritage site and the urban scenario with the incorporation of repetitive themes and formulas. These may function in other places and may respond a priori to pre-established expectations, but they shortly prove to be false and end up generating a negative experience, and thus negative spontaneous advertising. According to Donaire (2008), one of the paradoxes of new tourism proposals that hope to respond to the need for diversification which demand seeks is the rapidity

with which the elements of differentiation can become standardized actions. One needs simply to recall the duplicate presence in nearby destinations of some of the actions “which foster local and cultural heritage”, such as medieval markets, festivals, concerts, or contests, all which quickly stop being unique and notable due to repetition and proximity.

Another option for involvement, which proposes to diversify and differentiate tourism, something able to increase the appeal of the destination and to attract tourists visiting the cities, is referred to as the *development of actions ex novo*, according to the ETC Research Group (2005), cited by Antón (2008). In this report, we point out that a part of the milestones, which justify the attractiveness of better-positioned European cities refers to recent aspects of urban, urban development and functional processes not necessarily linked to the pre-existing fabric. The most highly valued are:

- The existence of a creative relationship between traditional cultural products and services, including means of communication, performances, design, architecture or fashion
- The esthetic of the urban landscape and the creating of unique settings
- The option to experience in the city the sense of design (art, architecture, night life, music fashion) associated on occasion with unique elements of architecture and urban planning
- The identification of the city with gastronomy, starting with unique initiatives linked to haute cuisine or local cuisine, to slow food, and niche categories such as wine tourism, among others

It seems clear, then, that the competitiveness of tourism in cities is also closely related to aspects such as the capacity for innovation and communication, the creativity of human capital, cultural and commercial vitality, and to the attitude of the local population vis-à-vis the visitor. The presence of a rich cultural heritage or investing in new sites of a different nature (museums, auditoriums, congress halls, cultural and leisure spaces) could be an important attraction to the tourism destination and to the city, yet they do not guarantee success in the tourism market.

In a similar light, as indicated in the report UrbanTUR 2012 (Excelltur 2013), it seems evident that the capacity to incorporate a differential value in the destination depends basically on the work carried out in orienting these resources toward enjoyment or business, in such a way that it transforms it into a true tourism attraction. Thus, the management of a resource through proactive actions involving different social agents should be the key objective for distinguishing the resource. This means moving beyond the traditional focus of resource management based almost exclusively on the preservation of the cultural heritage site (often with actions focused solely on



fig. 2: This beach-facing image of the town of Teulada-Moraira shows the combining of leisure space. The outdoor terraces, the heritage site information boards and the bicycle racks are brought together in one single space without any particular order or care given to the layout of the elements. Photograph: R. Navalón, 2013.



fig. 3: One of the iconic images of the Costa Blanca is the blue tile domes of Altea, repeatedly pictured in tourism brochures. Nevertheless, this church is not included in tourism itineraries that explain the local culture. Photograph: R. Navalón, 2012.

architectural procedures) and on facilitating accessibility by establishing schedules that streamline the visit (these are generally restricted in the Costa Blanca area, and they do not take into account actions which favor universal accessibility for people with disabilities).

In order to reinforce their competitive capacity, it is necessary to take a chance on establishing initiatives, which incorporate added value in a way that reflects the international patterns. Some of these actions could be:

- The incorporation of the ludic facet of heritage sites (with the programming of performed, guided visits, and the development of multimedia applications to make the information more accessible and satisfactory to the visitor)
- The restructuring and modification of public spaces to boost the perception of a friendly, sustainable and innovative city
- The inclusion of cities in specialized, thematic circuits starting with the incorporation of services added to creative, cultural or heritage site networks
- The support to the development of events
- The strengthening of actions conducive to generating the brand image of the city, starting with effective communication with traditional tour operators, with social networks which favor commercialization and public image, as well as with the residential population, social agents and business associates who work within them

Thus, we can affirm that the tourist image of tourism destinations is conditioned by the comprehensive reputation of the city and its general attributes, with which national and international markets are associated, in environments that are not exclusively based on tourism, but are directly affected by tourism.

With the objective of offering data regarding the behavior of a good part of tourism destinations on the Costa Blanca and more concretely in the urban areas, as a clear comparable example of the actions and management of urban attributes, we offer below evaluative data that affect the city of Alicante, administrative capital of the province and of the tourism area. To that end, the previously cited UrbanTUR 2012 report reflects the relative position of the 20 most successful Spanish tourist cities, based on the volume of travelers, and assessed through 57 indicators that condition the evolution of their competitive capacity in the tourism market.

Among the six core ideas of analysis in the report, we will focus on the column referred to as the *Determinants of urban environment and lifestyle*. According to UrbanTUR 2012, these make up an essential part of the experience that tourists perceive and for that reason are decisive in their ultimate satisfaction, contributing additional value to tourism products. Among the competitive determinants of the urban environment, the report includes various aspects, two of which we highlight for their relevance regarding the presentation of this essay:

- *Amenities in public spaces*: assesses the number of existing green spaces in the city as elements that

COMPETITIVE DETERMINANTS OF URBAN SURROUNDINGS AND OF LOCAL LIFE		19	84,5
1. Competitive determinants of the urban surroundings		18	87,4
a	Qualification of public spaces for tourism	3	115,5
a-1	Number of green spaces	4	99,7
a-2	Number of free Wifi zones	2	131,4
b	Attractiveness of public spaces	20	33,5
c	Quality of urban environment	6	113,1
c-1	Air quality	13	87,7
c-2	Efficiency of waste treatment	2	138,5
2. Competitive determinants of local life style		19	81,7
a	Internal reputation of the city	17	77,2
b	Attractiveness of life style as perceived by tourists	14	73,5
c	Promotion of educational excellence	12	89,2
d	Citizen safety	17	86,6

Table 1: Graphic representation of competitiveness from 1 to 20 for the competitive core ideas cited earlier (mean of all urban destinations = 100). Source: UrbanTUR, 2012. Exceltur 2013.

enrich recreation areas for the enjoyment of the citizen, which the tourist appreciates and from which the tourist also benefits. In the same fashion, public areas in the city where tourists can enjoy free WiFi access are included, with the objective of responding to the growing demand for being connected, for personal use and also for searching for information "in situ", which will facilitate enjoyment of the destination as a progressive "smart city".

- *Appeal of public spaces*: incorporates an assessment from local businesses regarding various elements that give form to the quality and enjoyment of the environment (the care taken with facades, the width of sidewalks, the distinction of urban furnishings, adequate lighting, sanitary conditions, etc.) in the areas of major tourism influx in the city where their businesses are located.

For the analysis of competitive determinants concerning lifestyle, other elements that present clear impacts regarding the appeal to the visitor are incorporated, from which we highlight two:

- *Internal urban reputation*: reflects through a wide variety of public opinion indicators, including those that integrate interviews with experts and a citizen survey implemented by Merco, the reputation of different Spanish cities regarding their level of development and provision of services.
- *Attractiveness of lifestyle as perceived by tourists*: incorporates the perception tourists have of the combination of offerings in the city collected by Tripadvisor in their ranking of Spanish cities. In

UrbanTUR this is included as an indicator that reflects the image, which the tourist has of the city and its limited ability through the assessment and opinions offered by tourists who have traveled to these cities.

According to these parameters, the evaluation of the city of Alicante is clearly negative in this element of analysis, which we consider key in the image projected by the city and how this image is perceived by social and tourism agents, by the citizens themselves, and by visitors. As the graph from this report shows (table 1), the results for Alicante under *Competitive determinants of the urban environment and lifestyle* situate the city in 19th place out of 20, very far indeed from the optimal place in the comprehensive ranking. As the data show, this position is due in great measure to the poor quality of public spaces in the opinion of local businessmen, in addition to the poor perception of quality of life for tourists according to Tripadvisor.

The positive part of this analysis highlights green spaces, situating Alicante in the 4th position of the total ranking. This element refers to the number of green spaces within the city limits that the tourist can enjoy, starting from the number of square meters of green space per resident and non-resident (tourist).¹ Another positive aspect of the city was the referenced *number of free public Wi-Fi zones* available, which truly bring value to the pleasure-seeking tourist and to businesses. In this regard, Alicante occupies second place.

Unfortunately the rating of the assessment of the quality of public spaces has overall been negative. We understand this parameter as the combination of elements in the urban environment that condition the perception

that tourists have and that can affect their level of satisfaction. The indicator gathers the mean assessment of public spaces (architectural attractiveness, beauty and care of facades, the layout of roads, the condition of the pavement, the cutting edge status of urban furnishings and other equipment, level of sanitary conditions, etc.). The majority of these factors have a direct repercussion on subjective perceptions of the city and of the attractiveness of public spaces. For this reason and for this study, we considered that the best indicator of assessment should be the opinions of the business owners themselves who have establishments in the cities and who know the impact these elements have on the sale of their products.²

To conclude this distressing panorama, which again situates the city in the worst position, it becomes relevant to pay attention to the parameter of *Internal reputation of the city*, taken from the perception of the level of quality of life the city transmits based on the assessment of citizens and a panel of local management experts.³ And finally, we must add the clearly improvable element of the *Attraction of lifestyle perceived by tourists*, which refers to the comprehensive perception of the overall tourism offering of the destination, as a means to approximating the ability to welcome, the quality of lifestyle and taking chances on the distinction of the local offering.⁴

By means of concrete examples, which will permit extrapolation, this study proposes an integrated methodology that offers key data regarding ways to analyze the quality of the urban scenario, the perceived quality of life and the tourism image that is projected and received, in order to impact the argument that together these elements condition the competitiveness of an urban tourism destination. We consider it essential to think about these factors, especially if we recognize that all of them depend on planning, scheduling and management carried out by the municipal administration.

Planning and management of the public space – could it be the answer?

In our understanding, the municipal administration can influence the urban and tourism future of the region (Rullán 2008). Involvement of the administration should consider a three-point perspective:

- In the first place, concerning the making of decisions regarding regional urban planning on different scales, and of course on the level of decision making vis-à-vis the form and function of that urban scale as well;
- It is decisive to prioritize the actions which will be the objective for the financing of infrastructures and equipment, as well as the definition, execution and later management of the actions developed in the public space;
- And finally, it is the responsibility of the municipal

administration to define in a precise and fair fashion the economic activities that businesses and individuals develop in these areas. The last facet, while not as recognized, is key to the definition of the functions of public space, and as a result, of the use made of public space. All of this has an effect on the atmosphere that is created and on the quality of the public space, beginning with the approval, scheduling, promotion and development of commercial activities, of services and of leisure activities, and thus, also of the perceived image.

In general terms, it is true that in recent decades administrations have made the effort to initiate plans and projects orientated toward restructuring tourism activity, starting with the "modernization" or re-modification of the urban scenario. The plans of Tourism Excellence and Vitality are clearly visible, as they are included in the plans of Vitality of the Tourism Product, propelled by an effort to coordinate the three levels of public administration: national, regional and local. Along these lines and among other objectives, the suggestion was made to correct the deficiencies in infrastructure, equipment and resources of tourism destinations excessively centered during the first stages of Fordism on the development of hotel rooms. This was a neoliberal context, oriented mainly toward the production of spaces for residential tourism, which in many cases had eliminated the need to define and develop central spaces where leisure, recreation, culture and meeting places were favored, as hubs of attraction to generate a true structure of the tourism city. Nevertheless, many of these plans were reduced to superficial urban touch-ups, a simple surface fix to the urban fabric, without managing to resolve other key problems to better the tourism city. Among such problems were a variety of accessibility and/or pedestrian difficulties, traffic jams, and the prioritization of a functional strategy for better use of free, public spaces among other actions.

Beyond the re-urbanization of streets, squares, promenades and parks, in practice these actions have not taken into consideration a reflection regarding a more adequate role for them. Neither have they reflected on how to face the maintenance and management of the use that is made of these spaces. In this way, the complexity of managing each sector and the progressive reduction of the municipal technical and financial structures associated with fiscal consolidation that affects the greater public administration, ends up favoring a delegation of management, and even of decision making, to private business initiatives. This delegation starts with actions that guarantee the viability of the operations in economic terms, something which should also be reflected in the municipal balance sheets.

Within this context of searching for competitive destinations, when an agreement with the investor was possible, the administration contributed to the fact that



fig.4: New buildings along the "paseo de Levante" esplanade contrast with the 19th century constructions along Alicante's seaport, increasing the appeal of the area. Photograph: R. Navalón, 2010.

the business results were the ones they hoped for. They became involved only from the perspective of executing the plans, and of assuming the cost of a large part of these actions to modify infrastructure and urban areas, in the search for the "restructuring" of destinations. But once the public investment of remodeling the street, the square or the esplanade is carried out, without a basic, concrete objective, on many occasions the management of these public works is put in the hands of private companies, which little by little begin to take over the common space, resulting in de facto privatization of their use for the local community and visitors.

Some conclusions

It seems evident that the restructuring of mature tourist destinations such as the Costa Blanca entails a challenge of enormous complexity, and that in order to carry it out a multitude of internal as well as external factors must be taken into consideration. These include changes in motivations and habits in the demand for consumption, expanded use of information technologies and all the processes of the value chain of the tourism product, and changes in global financing and economy. To all that we must add the complexity of the very process of

transformation and invigoration of a consolidated urban reality, without taking up more space, which leads to carrying out efforts in those strategies in order to make this all possible.

It has been shown how competitiveness in traditional destinations, in the coastal areas or in cities does not reside only in the value of heritage sites, beaches or climate, but is also linked to perceived urban quality, the ability to innovate, to comprehend and the ability to react to the new needs of ever more demanding and unpredictable residents and visitors.

Therefore, it is important to understand that a strategy for restructuring, diversifying or distinguishing a tourism destination should base itself not only on investment strategies that can seem opportune and ensure short term-effects. On the contrary, it is best to reflect on the image of the destination that one hopes to create and project, starting with the characteristics of local identity. The improvement of the urban environment, from the definition of the form and function most suitable to the use of this space required by society, should be one of the keys to actions capable of generating the urban, business and social atmosphere that respond to this call for renewal.

Notes

1. In order for Exceltur to produce this indicator, information from the Local Sustainability Report (Informe Sostenibilidad Local) was used, by the Spanish Sustainability Observatory (Observatorio de la Sostenibilidad de España).
2. These opinions of local businessmen were collected by the Survey on Tourism Business Confidence by Exceltur (Encuesta de Confianza Turística Empresarial de Exceltur).
3. In the descriptive column *Quality of Life*, from the UrbanTUR 2012 report, the MERCO index regarding the reputation of the city was added, and put together based on surveys (N=9,100) conducted by MERCO with residents of the major Spanish cities. The work was evaluated by a panel of 95 experts in urban management, where the assessment of friendliness, civility, open-mindedness of the locals, appeal, entertainment, and commercial and cultural offerings, among others, were incorporated.
4. The value of this indicator is the position of the city in a ranking of the 25 best Spanish destinations prepared by Tripadvisor (Travellers Choice 2011), based on a large sampling of assessments and opinions of national and international travelers. Alicante does not occupy any of the first 25 places of the Tripadvisor ranking, which accorded it the 26th place.

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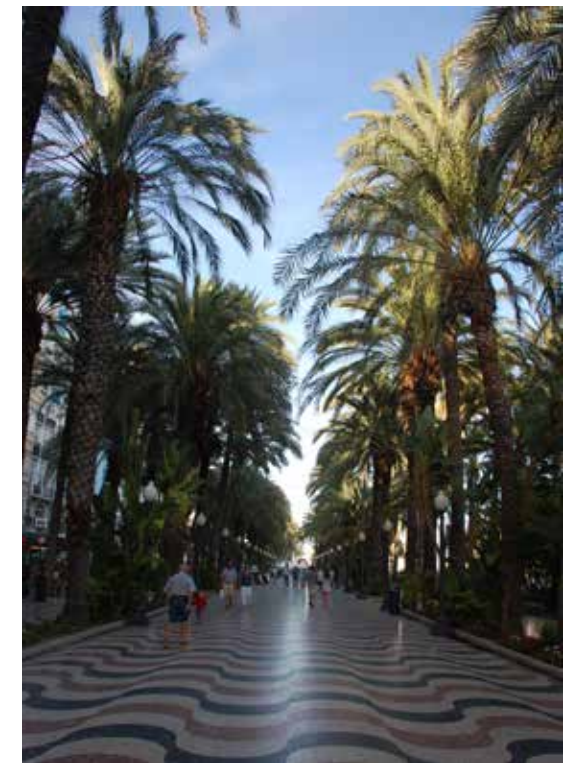


fig. 5 (above): The typical image of Alicante is the "Explanada de España," one of the most emblematic green zones along the city's coast. Photograph: R. Navalón, 2012.

fig. 6 (below): The granting of permits for various handicraft stalls, along with setting up of outdoor bars and restaurants, ends up privatizing public spaces, thus altering the iconic image of the city. Photograph: R. Navalón, 2013.