

TOURIST AND REAL ESTATE DEVELOPMENT OF MEDITERRANEAN AND INSULAR TERRITORIES OF SPAIN VERSUS ITS INTERNATIONAL REFERENTS (FLORIDA AND THE CÔTE D'AZUR): A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Santiago Fernández Muñoz

Universidad Carlos III de Madrid
scfernan@hum.uc3m.es

Diego A. Barrado Timón

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid
diego.barrado@uam.es

Since the last decades of the century and until the final emergence of the economic crisis in 2008 the Spanish shoreline underwent an intense process of urbanization and construction. The main hypothesis of this paper suggests that the urbanization pressure in Spanish shoreline during that period did not respond to any strategic planning with regard to the territorial model adopted and its environmental and socioeconomic consequences. There is also a surprising lack of comparative analysis with another territories and international touristic destinations affected by similar processes, with the only exception of some mentions that justify the pattern of urbanization along the Spanish southern coast and in the islands through uncritical reference to supposed models of assumed success, being sentences such as «*the Mediterranean coastline will become the California of Europe*», «*the Mediterranean coast is the Florida of Europe*», or «*the Spanish Riviera*» and similar ones affirmations of customary appearance. Therefore, behind those regular affirmations there seem not to be a wealth of expertise or comparative analysis of the growth pattern the different parts of the Spanish coast has experienced with the pattern of those European and American areas considered as models.

This article advances on the comparison of tourism and real estate development on the Spanish shoreline with the one Florida and Côte d'Azur coastlines experienced. To this aim an initial overview of the urbanization process and the development of tourism on the Spanish coastline is provided, where the first remarkable element is the verification of a population and economic growth far higher in this territories than the one in the rest of the country; this was largely due to the boost of the real estate sector, which rose the

housing stock by 24% in only six years (2001-2007). And although differences across the intensity and pace of urbanization exist, they have not at any case been conditioned neither by tourism strategies nor by planning instruments, but mainly by the pressure of demand itself with the structure of real estate sector in mind as well as by local housing strategies and policies.

The result is the consolidation of a regional model of development in the Spanish coastline based in residential tourism, urbanization, construction and sale of housing for non-permanent population. In the long term this model has a lower economic impact than tourism, since tourism uses regulated hotel rooms as result of both a small average occupancy rate and the lower expense per capita it entails.

In commonly used terms of international benchmarks, both the French Riviera and Florida share the objective of attracting people from areas who suffer northern cold winters with high rainfall and limited hours of sunshine. Both are consolidated touristic destinations and are usually placed among the most important ones all over the earth, this on account of both international and national travel flows.

In the Florida case, the swift increase in the number of visitors was akin to the accelerated urbanization processes which were even greater than those occurred in Spain in recent decades. Moreover, in both the Florida and the Spanish coastline cases similar economic and spatial dynamics took place, since the housing development was in parallel evolution with the rapid price increase, what led many authors to talk about a booming real estate activity with housing bubbles to burst.

The relevance of migration of elderly population is also common to both territories. The so-called North American «*snowbirds*» -migration flows of retirees or close to retirement workers to U.S. southern states in search of warmer winters- are a group that shows partly resemblance to what the author Juan Requejo called «*climate immigrants*» in Spain: a group of people who transfer their regular residence over six months each year, guided by a diverse range of motivations out of which the climate of the Spanish coastline plays a crucial role.

There are, therefore, important resemblances between both Florida and the Spanish coastal that gave rise to a type of urban development presently at the core of the existing economy crisis that is now linked, besides factors of different nature, to the financial risks assumed to boost a housing sector of explosive growth. However, the importance acquired by the building sector is significantly higher along the Spanish coast, what indicates the existence of a property industry in Florida that is more connected to tertiary industry than to housing building itself. In fact, data from Florida show a tourist accommodation structure far different to the Spanish coastal one, being Florida where accommodation vacancies higher relevance have, what gives rise to a more efficient use of the accommodation capacity already built, since a business framework whose main aim is to achieve the maximum occupancy for each one of the accommodation vacancies has been created. Another fact that reinforces the existence in Florida of a more intensive use of both space and tourist facilities is the seasonality that tourism flows show, with very low figures in the American state, where there difference between the higher number of visitors by quarter and the lower one is only a 4.6%.

As far as the French Riviera is concerned, it is one of the first European coastal areas in undergoing through a massive tourism development and also the place where the linear tourist urban model of high-density and beachfront starts to take shape. From this point of view, it can clearly be considered a predecessor of the tourist urban model in the Spanish coastline, particularly of areas such as Costa del Sol (Malaga).

Major differences are, however, as for both the overall structure of the economy of the French and Spanish coastlines and the particular structure of the tourism industry. Thus, the first of them is a more diversified economy than the one regularly existing in the majority of intensely urbanized Spanish coastal sections. Moreover, and although the ratio between the number of second residences and the number of tourist accommodations is relatively similar to the existing ration in coastal regions such as Malaga, Tarragona or Alicante, the reality of the situation is that there is a very important difference between both ratios in terms of house vacancies, difference that reaches very high percentages in a large number of sections of the Spanish coast and, despite the existing difficulties while analyzing it, is to a great extent deemed to be as a result of the more important speculative processes occurred in the Spanish coastline.

