

TOURIST SPACES, LAND MANAGEMENT AND POLITICAL ATTITUDES, THE CASE OF CERCA VIEJA RESORT IN FUENCALIENTE OF LA PALMA (CANARY ISLANDS)

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In the Canary Islands, the intervention of insular and regional administrations legalizing what had been previously considered as illegal is a relatively common procedure and in practice means the elimination of municipal autonomy in the urban area.

This article shows, through a recent example, how the political attitudes, in practice, take precedence over standards, and this is a generalized process in all Canary Islands political instances. This situation has resulted in a particular model of town development which is far away from general interest and comes close to private ones.

The case we want to reflect happens in Fuencaliente's municipal area, a municipality located in the south of the island of La Palma (Canary Islands), which occupies an extension of 56 km².

It is a largely agricultural town, with vines and bananas as preferred crops. Agriculture, which had historically supported the municipality population, has nowadays lost its leadership because of marketing problems and competition with international productions.

Parallel to the decline in agricultural activity and as has happened in the insular area, the tourism sector has increased as an alternative social-economic development.

In this way, in the year 2000 begins, in the shape of hotel, the first tourist project in the zone. A building site with many administrative irregularities: several municipal permissions for its construction, disobeyed paralyzation orders and with denunciations for lack of official visas. For this reason it was denounced in several times and the building was sealed. The construction company ignored everything and built almost totally the buildings of the tourist complex.

In addition to administrative non-compliance, the hotel violated the Law 6 / 2001 or Tourist Moratorium, which provided the suspension of the granting of planning permission which were enabled for the construction or expansion of tourist accommodation.

The Canary Islands Government then began a long legal dispute in the Superior Court of Justice of Canary Islands and the Supreme Court of Madrid, in which it asks again for the paralyzation of the works, and even the demolition of the hotel because of its illegality.

The definitive paralyzation of the works by the Canary Government generated a big social and business discomfort. In the construction company they go against to this decision of paralyzation of the works of building and urbanization of the hotel, because this would bring unemployment and economic ruin to the construction companies. The insular institutions supported the project because it was supposed to bring wealth to the island of La Palma.

Then, heeding the claims, the president of the Insular Cabildo made a commitment with the businessmen responsible for the construction of the complex, to act as mediator between the promoters and the Canary Government. A support with which all political parties and economic agents were coinciding.

From institutional instances they looked for political solutions to the problem. The most targeted consisted of re-turning the project, diminishing the number of beds considerably and increasing the category of the hotel up to five stars, as well as linking it to certain ways of leisure, that is to say, adapting it to the in force Law.

Some solutions to the conflict were then specified: to convert the hotel into two independent hotels, which should be linked to a golf course of upcoming construction in the town and certain quality tourism initiatives that would be generated in the area such as a spa, complementary services and green areas of this facility.

In a meeting between the Vice-president of the Canary Government, the counsellors of Public Works, Housing and Waters and of Territorial Politics of the regional Government, the president of the Cabildo and the mayor, with technical personnel and members of the management team of the company promoter La Palma Resort, comes near to the agreement of reducing the number of beds and building two hotels inside the same tourist complex.

The approval of the Directives of General Arrangement of Tourism (Law 19/2003), has just solved the conflict. This law eliminated the paralyzation of the construction projects that the Law 6/2002 indicated. Therefore, it made the hotel project viable and, though it was forcing to approve, previous to the concession of new tourist licenses, a Special Territorial Plan that would establish the magnitude of the construction, exceptionally, for 18 months, without needing to approve the Special Territorial Tourist Plan, 1.250 new beds could be constructed, just the amount agreed in the political - managerial agreements.

The Government order of paralyzation of the project was removed, definitely solving the legal disputes that the hotel had.

In 2004 the hotel was finished and it was offered to the international tourist market.

During the first years they reached the «no vacancy». At present the situation is very different. In high season it has only had 300 clients, situation that has forced to close practically half of the installation and fire 120 employees.

Neither the hotel seems to have been a definite boost for the tourism sector on the island as it was said. During the last decade, La Palma has lost 23.7% of European visitors, some data which contrasts with the increase of the number of beds, that in two facilities (Princess and Las Olas Breña Baja) added 2,200 more beds to a total of about 10,000 legalized beds which were offered on the island.

As conclusion, to say that what happened suggests a double reading, one that has to be with the content and its consequences and the other one with the form.

Regarding to the content, it is necessary to say that in La Palma, up to recent dates, there was a double speech. On one hand it was showed up institutionally and in practice, a model of development which, in tourist matter, avoided the ways opened in the canary islands with more tradition in mass tourism. La Palma was betting formally for sustainable and quality models, such as rural tourism, ecotourism and agro tourism, turning into an alternative model of organization into the Canaries. A situation which came into contradiction if we analyze its town planning, in which the number of beds included in municipal development plans was no way different from resort islands such as Tenerife and Gran Canaria. A situation that is beginning to emerge as a major economic insular alternative when it comes the depletion of the model based until now on farming subsidies.

The second reading that derives from the facts has to do with the ways in which the hotel is developing and the implications of the government in the process of legalization of the building.

The more than notable irregularities carried out through all the gestation process of the hotel are an example of the non implementation of the urban laws in one moment, and the modification of them in another, all of that for the benefit of urban business, revealing the close relationship between business and politics.

