

## LOS BAÑOS DE MULA (MURCIA): A RURAL ENVIRONMENT IN DECLINE. ECONOMIC AND EDUCATIONAL PROPOSALS

*José Antonio López Fernández*  
Universidad de Córdoba  
jalopez@uco.es

*Gregorio Canales Martínez*  
*M<sup>a</sup> Isabel Vera Muñoz*  
Universidad de Alicante  
gregorio.canales@ua.es, vera@ua.es

The rural setting of Los Baños, in the municipality of Mula (Murcia) presents a clear demographic and economic decline. One of the main causes of this process is the scarce update of its hot springs' use, which traditionally were arranged in hostels and bathhouses independently. However, the uniqueness of its urban heritage and hydraulic architecture, archaeological and natural resources of the surrounding area and the current importance of health tourism are aspects to consider in the promotion and development of this territory. This paper presents a series of actions that could significantly improve the social and economic situation of this place so attractive and unique.

The purpose of the study has been to verify the current situation of the hamlet of Los Baños de Mula, in the geographical center of the Region of Murcia, where from time immemorial the waters of a thermal spring have been used for therapeutic and agricultural purposes. Among the particular objectives is the analysis of the geophysical and urban characteristics of the enclave, the traditional distribution of its waters, as well as the evolution that the lodging offer has had in recent years, which will provide us with a temporary vision of its development. The work methodology used consists of a geographical analysis of local scope, with extensive field work and visits to the place to check the particularities offered by traditional paradors and bath houses. Interviews were conducted with the managers of the establishments that are in operation, as well as with other neighbors who live in the territory. All this is completed with a bibliographic review on different issues centered on: the archaeological and / or geological aspects of great importance in the area; the descriptive works of the urban space both recent and historical; and, finally, the projects and plans of dynamisation made by the administration and focused on the planning of the access roads, the protection of singular buildings and the possible updating of the tourist offer at the end of the 20th century. Likewise, it has been interesting to search

for documents related to the area, basically centered on the Municipal File of Mula that, although it is not very abundant, provide relevant data that answer several questions about the ownership of the buildings and the distribution of the waters, currently in force. With this information, improvement proposals are proposed for the conservation of real estate and increase its profitability, incorporating new functions offered by the environment.

The group of Los Baños consists of a group of buildings arranged discontinuously on the right bank of the Mula River, along about 500 meters, where three clearly differentiated urban units can be observed. The first would be formed by the spa complex, which occupies the central part of the hamlet, equidistant about 250 meters from the other two enclaves. It is situated on the western slope of the Los Llanos plateau, which falls into the river bed, facing the La Almagra hill, where the source of the system is located, from which a system of ditches flows to drive the flows to the different dwellings. The structure of the street has been organized around the primitive road that winds the hillside to save the steep slope and that has given rise to the appearance of two streets at different levels, the lower (Calle Juan Martínez Soto) which is parallel to the axis of the river, and the upper one (calle Cuesta del Horno) that ascends to the upper slope area. In both the paradors were located, while above the spring houses were built for the families that served the thermal facilities.

The second, to the north, is the neighborhood of La Misericordia, which takes its name from the baroque hermitage built in the 18th century and which nowadays brings together a village formed by some twelve houses; entity where a hospice was built at the beginning of the next century, thanks to the benefactor action carried out by a Mulanic priest, destined to people without resources so that they could enjoy the therapeutic power of the waters. The third, to the south, is located outside the valley of the river and at the top of the plateau, where there are some buildings arranged in isolation, which emerged under the protection of the road from Murcia to Caravaca de la Cruz, as are the sale of the Magdalena and the old post house Parador de Morata with several annexed houses; Also in that area was located a pedestrian house, now defunct, and some schools that never went into operation.

At present, the hamlet presents a clear setback by the closing of several thermal establishments. The evolution of the accommodation offer shows that between 1993 and 2017 the number of spas in use has been reduced from six to three, the decrease of which can be seen in the accommodation capacity (by decreasing the number of apartments from 29 to 18). ) as in the total available seats (from 140 beds to 86). In order to overcome this adverse situation, possible lines of action are outlined below, which, in addition to projecting the importance of the urban area and its surroundings, act as an economic engine for the future. These proposals, managed in a globalized way, can help to boost this small nucleus, saving it from the physical deterioration that shows a good part of the properties and converting it into an attractive tourist place within the municipality. After the field work and interviews with locals and managers of the spa facilities, some ideas related to the use of water, as well as natural and cultural heritage; all from a perspective of sustainable local development, to which must be added the didactic and educational possibilities offered by the territory.

Among them, the authors propose three priority measures such as:

A) Construction or adaptation of a space as an Interpretation Center, using one of the buildings currently closed. This infrastructure would serve to enhance and value the characteristics and identity of the territory, from a tourist point of view but also didactic. This exhibition must show a holistic approach that addresses issues related to the tangible and intangible heritage of the area in relation to the buildings that organize the space but also to the customs, traditions and behaviors of society that generated a health infrastructure here. Minority and small-scale character, under a concept of exploitation of individual type formed by the guest house. Model away from the big therapeutic business, with a more modern and capitalist approach. In this way, students can make sense of many theoretical concepts by comparing both types of spas and reaching conclusions that allow them to make judgments about the different proposals developed and their subsequent tourist use.

B) The creation of itineraries of natural-cultural nature that link the rural nucleus with the surrounding environment. This proposal would allow the visitor to observe and get in contact with all the facts exposed in the interpretation center; from those of natural interest as well as the archaeological and cultural assets, located around the spa. In this sense, the archaeological sites located in the hill of La Almagra, an old town that preceded the current city of Mula, as well as all the hydraulic heritage that surrounds the riverbed, especially the water distribution system, are particularly relevant. traditional by ferris wheels that existed downstream of Los Baños.

C) Finally, to improve the capacity of accommodation and promotion of the thermal complex, with the start-up of a digital domain that offers the global peculiarities of the aforementioned district, with an attractive and broad content of its main characteristics and with links to the different local resources that make the place attractive as an interior tourist destination for a population that today does not know the uniqueness of this place. It is, therefore, to visualize through the Web the tourism potential of this rural enclave.

Among them, the authors propose three priority measures such as: a) Construction or adaptation of a space as an Interpretation Center, using one of the buildings currently closed; b) the creation of a natural-cultural itinerary that links the rural nucleus with the surrounding environment; and, finally, c) improve the accommodation and promotion capacity of the thermal complex, with the start-up of a digital domain that offers the global peculiarities of the aforementioned district, with an attractive and broad content of its main characteristics and with links to the different local resources, that make the place attractive as an indoor tourist destination for a population that today is unaware of the uniqueness of this place.

The development of these proposals are aimed at achieving sustained tourism that appreciates both natural and cultural values. For this, all social actors must participate, starting with a clear determination of the resident and owner of the water, together with the local administration. This way it will be possible to capture all kinds of visitors, but fundamentally those of regional and national scope that do not know the formidable thermal qualities of the spring as the potential landscape of its surroundings. In this integral role, the role of public and private organizations is essential to rescue Los Baños de Mula and its surroundings, and be able to join forces, to make this place a heritage reference that can be known and enjoyed by everybody.