

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

SOCIOSPATIAL CONTRADICTIONS IN THE TOURISTIFICATION PROCESS OF LA PAZ, MEXICO

Mario Antonio Moreno Escobedo

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

mariomoreno982@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8020-7199>

Álvaro López López

Instituto de Geografía, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

lopuslopez@geografia.unam.mx

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0719-1316>

1. INTRODUCTION

La Paz, the capital city of Baja California Sur state, Mexico, has leaned heavily on tourism as a key economic development driver. However, over the last decade, the real estate sector has expanded considerably, prioritizing the renovation of coastal urban spaces for the benefit of tourist capital. While the production of a tourist city has improved the coastline's image and infrastructure, opposing socio-spatial processes have emerged, excluding the local population from tourist interest areas, particularly from two traditional and iconic public spaces: the boardwalk or *Malecón* and La Paz historic center.

This article illustrates how the touristification process that La Paz is undergoing has generated socio-spatial contradictions, leading to social mobilizations for the right to live and inhabit the city. To this end, the article begins with a reflection and discussion on the production of tourist space in coastal cities (Calvario and Palafox, 2020; Morales and Baca, 2023), taking Henry Lefebvre's proposal on 'the production of space' (2013) as its theoretical-methodological foundation and as an interpretative framework to reflect on the consequences of tourism growth; particularly around the implications that this phenomenon has on the reconfiguration and renewal of its urban space, privileging exchange value over use value in tourist capital spaces of interest.

2. OBJECTIVE

The objective of this article is to analyze the socio-spatial implications of the La Paz current touristification process, based on the role that contemporary urbanization specializing in tourism plays in the commodification of urban space.

3. METHODOLOGY

With a qualitative methodological design, this research employed methodological triangulation (Decrop, 1999) through critical discourse analysis techniques, passive participant observation, and in-depth interviews, allowing for a critical and correlational analysis and theoretical discussion of our object of study.

The methodological strategy was divided into three important stages. The first stage was developing a synthesis based on bibliographic sources, newspapers, digital media, and social networks to state the context of La Paz tourism's challenges. Within this process, state and municipal development plans were analyzed and included.

At its second stage, passive participant observation, conducted through three field visits between December 2020 and November 2022, helped to provide a general context of the social dynamics and practices surrounding the areas of most significant tourist interest.

Finally, through purposive sampling and using the snowball technique, 15 interviews were conducted with a diverse group of residents who used the city center, including the historic center and boardwalk, for leisure or work. The most important thing at this point was to focus on investigating the general perception that residents have of their city and lifestyle, as well as how they conceive, and value urban changes related to tourism.

4. RESULTS

Historically, La Paz's spatial practices have been deeply rooted in its commercial link to the ocean. For most of the 20th century, La Paz thrived as a commercial hub. Its economic, political, and cultural dynamics were shaped by its role as a connecting point between the Baja California peninsula and the immediate Mexican mainland. As a coastal city, the daily life of its inhabitants revolved around its commercial port and coastal boardwalk, the very place where the city originated and expanded.

Since the late 20th century, the local government has supported tourism as one of its main economic development pillars and a key element in urban planning decisions. Hence, it has promoted the idea of promoting this activity under the banner of job creation and economic growth.

However, it was not until 2015, with the influence of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and various levels of government, that mayor Armando Martínez updated the 2015-2018 Urban Development Plan (UDP) for La Paz, establishing as a priority the consolidation of the city's tourist vocation through the municipal government intervention in developing first-class infrastructure and services directed at tourism.

This UDP established six corridors with the most significant potential for tourism development, requiring the construction and renovation of urban infrastructure: The tourist corridor along the Álvaro Obregón boardwalk; Chametla-El Centenario; the Mogote Peninsula; the Datilar region; the Comitán coastal region; and the Tecolote coastal region; as well as hills, mountains, dunes, and natural areas in general. Meanwhile, eleven possible projects were established to "boost" the local economy. Five of them were directly linked to tourism within the city's urban space: Renewal of the Álvaro Obregón tourist corridor (boardwalk); Renewal of the Chametla-El Centenario tourist corridor; the Man-

glito tourism development; the Coromuel Beach club; and the renewal and rehabilitation of the Historic Center.

From that moment on, La Paz began a process of intensified tourism marked by the renovation and reconfiguration of urban space focused on improving the image and infrastructure of the coastline, particularly around two traditional and iconic public spaces: the boardwalk and the historic center. These circumstances encouraged investments in the real estate and tourism market, which sought to take advantage of the space capital gain provided by the maritime-coastal landscape, while shaping the image of a modern city and a new landscape architecture oriented towards consumption.

However, over time, this form of space production for tourist consumption created a contradictory phenomenon. While the territorial structure was modified and adjusted to the needs of tourism and real estate, local inhabitants were excluded from these same spaces, creating a considerable difference between the 'tourist place' and the 'non-tourist place'.

It is worth noting that the inhabitants of La Paz have built their identity through the experiences each of them has given to specific places in their daily lives. La Paz beaches, the boardwalk, the kiosk, the sunsets, the pier, and the historic center, are lived spaces that feed the city's imagination and vindicate its inhabitants' sense of belonging. Public spaces and proximity to beaches, both inside and outside the city, play a decisive role in strengthening the culture and sense of belonging to La Paz.

Urban renewal and reconfiguration geared towards tourism have accentuated a privatization process of these spaces, passing over local needs. From the perspective of their inhabitants, places that once represented spaces for social gathering and coexistence have been diluted over the years with the increase in tourism. The boardwalk and the historic center are the scene of the dispute and the adherence to consolidate the social practice of tourism as part of the new consumption dynamics.

In response to this situation, a differential space has emerged, where urban resistance is inevitably rising, bringing citizens together and activating them politically. This process has encouraged social mobilizations that demand from the local government better urban policies and control of mass tourism in their city.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The functional transformation of urban space in La Paz is part of a global context in which tourism has emerged as a significant political project, influencing the configuration and renovation of coastal cities in Mexico. In the case of La Paz, the functional transformation of the space has benefited a model of space production that prioritizes touristic activities, becoming the primary mechanism for capital accumulation.

The process of touristification currently underway in La Paz highlights a contradictory scenario in which conflicts over and within the space give rise to a constant struggle between local (lived) spaces and tourism-oriented economic rationalization processes (global space), resulting in banal spaces that tend to homogenize and prioritize exchange value over the use value of urban space.

It is within a process of tension between the inhabitants of La Paz and tourism that it was possible to identify that both the historic center and the coastal boardwalk are two

lived spaces through which a large part of their inhabitants' identities has been constructed. At the same time, these are also the spaces that have generated the biggest interest and dynamism from tourism and real estate capital. Hence, a space of conflict emerges, showing a dispute over the use and control of these spaces.

Against this backdrop, social movements have brought together different social actors claiming the right to the city. By demanding collective alternatives from the local government, they are seeking more dialogue and better public policies that establish the importance of common and public spaces as part of the daily lives of their inhabitants, and within the social dynamics and practices that give meaning to La Paz urban life.