

FROM TOURISM TO METROPOLIZATION: ANALYSIS OF THE DRIVING FORCES OF URBAN TRANSFORMATION ALONG THE NORTHERN COSTA BRAVA (CATALONIA, SPAIN)

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Abstract

The driving forces of urban transformation in the northern Costa Brava region of Catalonia, Spain, are analysed in relation to the overall socio-economic changes occurring at the turn of the century, the financialization of the economy, the growth in real estate investment, the urban sprawl, and increases in different types of mobility flow.

Through qualitative analysis based on in-depth interviews, the present study determined the impact of tourism and second homes, migratory flows (both at the local, county and regional level and the continental and intercontinental level) and the dynamics of the housing market on the transformation of settlements and the emergence of new urban developments. The simultaneous and interrelated effects of these factors, operating at different territorial levels, affected population growth and the distribution of urban development. As a result, the study area can no longer be considered only as a tourist destination.

Keywords: *driving forces, urban transformation, metropolization, Costa Brava, Catalonia, Spain*

1. INTRODUCTION

The northern portion of the Costa Brava (Catalonia, Spain) underwent a surge of tourism-related development in the 1960s and 1970s, but has recently experienced new development related to socioeconomic changes at the turn of the century. As a result, the area offers a good example of the dynamics of metropolization that occurred in the territory during this time period.

The financialization of the economy and real estate investment in the late 20th and early 21st centuries were important elements in the development of many of the advanced capitalist economies (Pike & Pollar, 2010). These factors also contributed to construction sector growth and the urban sprawl in many regional settings (EEA, 2006), among them Mediterranean Europe (Salvati & Gargiulo, 2014), in addition to being among the main triggers of the global economic crisis (Harvey, 2011). Beginning in the mid-90s, Spain saw a continuous increase in housing demand, land prices, residential construction, and in residential housing as an investment, considered for its exchange value (Fernández Duran, 2006); indeed, much of the

economy tilted toward the construction sector (Coscolluela & Flores, 2013). All of these elements drove the process of urban sprawl in Spain during this period (García Coll, 2011) which has entailed high environmental costs (González and De Lazaro, 2011). This dynamic found a privileged setting on the Mediterranean coast of Spain (Rullan, 2011), characterized by the availability of major investors and a history of blurring the dividing line between tourism and real estate investment. This situation generated a huge real estate bubble (Akim et al., 2014) due to the high expectations of buyers and investors, which contributed to the outbreak of the economic crisis the country experienced (Romero, 2010), the consequences of which are still being felt.

The aim of the present study was to determine the driving forces responsible for the transformation of urban settlements and the emergence of new urban developments in the plain of Alt Empordà, north of the Costa Brava in Catalonia, Spain. The study focussed on a key period for economic, territorial and urban development in Spain, the housing boom of 1996-2006, and an area that is representative of many other coastal areas of Spain and of Mediterranean Europe, spaces initially subjected to the pressures of tourism, but which then evolved into more complex territorial patterns.

First, based on our review of literature, we will trace the development of urban settlements in the area. After outlining the methodology, based on interviews, we will discuss the driving forces of urban transformation, focussing on three elements: tourism and second homes, migratory flows, and the dynamics of the housing market. Finally, we offer our conclusions, in an effort to contribute to the debate on the causes of the increasing urbanization of the coast of Spain and the rest of Mediterranean Europe.

2. ALT EMPORDÀ: AN EXAMPLE OF METROPOLIZATION OF A TERRITORY

The plain of Alt Empordà in north-eastern Catalonia (Spain) lies about 100 km from the city of Barcelona, as the crow flies, and is very close to the border with France. The area is part of the northern end of the Costa Brava, a renowned tourist destination, and includes 21 municipalities of the Alt Empordà county, extending along the coast from Roses to L'Escala, both dynamic resort cities, and inland to Figueres, the capital of the county (Figure 1). This is a singular area that offers a good laboratory to analyse the dynamics related to urbanization processes, which affect all types of spaces and settlements, from residential to tourism and rural spaces.

Since 1960, the whole length of the Costa Brava, like many other areas of the Spanish coast, has experienced strong urban growth related to international tourism (Cals, 1982, Barbaza, 1988; Fraguell 1994), with important consequences for the region and for its environment and landscape (Martí, 2012). On the plain of Alt Empordà, the urbanized area grew 10-fold (Cuadrado-Ciuraneta et al, 2007), mainly on the coastline and largely due to numerous developments of second homes. In the 1980s, the democratic town councils (restored after the end of the Franco dictatorship) were unable to control the situation, construction of tourism housing development continued, and the tourism options on offer definitively shifted to this form of accommodation.

In the early 90s, the area began to experience changes related to the development of tourism activities (Donaire et al, 1997), but also due to new demographic trends such as population growth and mobility related to the dynamics of the labour market and housing prices (Pavón, 2002). There was also a greater presence of “floating” populations of foreign European origin, mainly retirees from northern Europe, or immigrant labour from other continents. This led to the phenomenon known as “residentialism” –meaning that second homes lose weight in the housing mix as they become primary residences (Donaire, 2005). It is in this context that we find the construction fever, beginning in 1996, which for some was

related to the increase in second homes (Oliver, 2005), while others suggest it was a response to dynamics that were common throughout the territory (Cals, 2005). The increased construction pressure led to a leap into the interior (Nogué, 2005), with urbanization beginning in the main urban centres and extending along the main roads. Three major types of urban landscape appeared: expansion of the existing town, new residential areas, and industrial areas (Valdunciel, 2016).

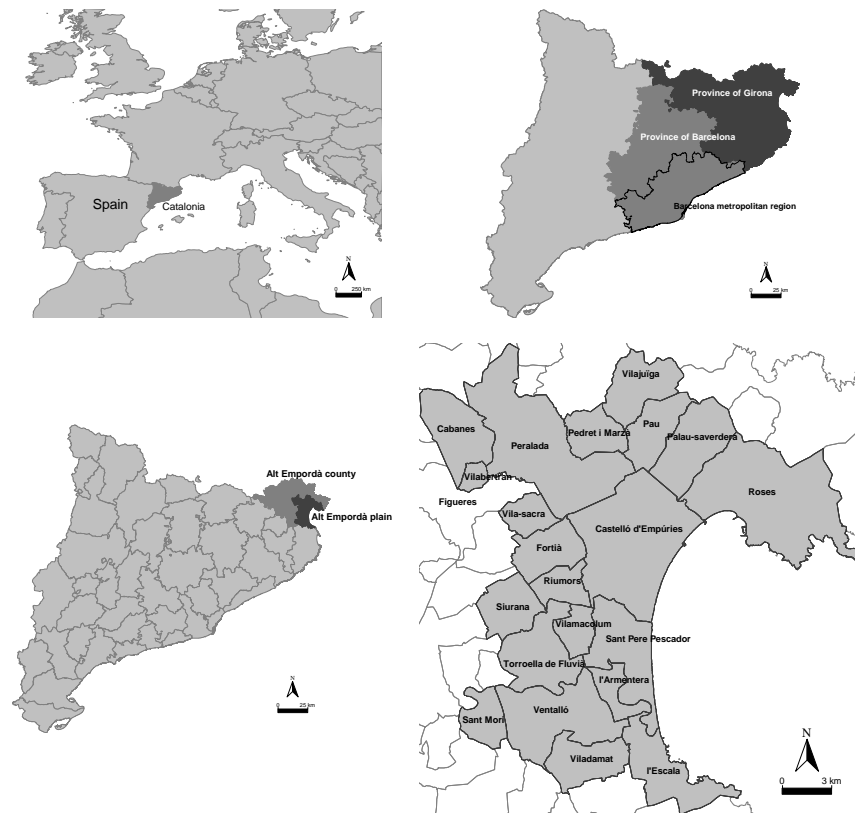


Figure 1. Geographic context of the plain of Alt Empordà.

A complex system of settlements evolved, as several waves of urban growth were superimposed on the territory (Cuadrado-Ciuraneta et al, 2017), at first very much determined by tourism and demand for second homes, but more recently shaped by the dynamic nature of metropolitan suburbanization, by rural sprawl, and by the transformation and redevelopment of mature tourist areas. This new type of urban and territorial settings provides a good example of the dynamics of urbanization deployed in the late 20th and early 21st century and related to the processes of globalization and increased mobility flows (Castells 2010). More specifically, it reflects what the Italian planner Francesco Indovina (2003) described as "new metropolization of the territory", referring to the context of Mediterranean Europe. He considered this to be the functional integration of different urban areas into a single unit, with a variable geometry depending on the various relationships and interdependencies. Nel-lo (2002) validated this construct using Catalonia as a case study, concluding that the Catalan urban system increasingly acts as a single functional unit, a "city of cities" connected by complex flows and relationships, developed under the same dynamics, behaviours, and lifestyles.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study was based on a multiple methodology approach, which combined quantitative and qualitative methods. The present article focuses on qualitative analysis based on a series of in-depth interviews about the driving forces behind the transformation of urban settlements during the housing boom of 1996-2006.

After evaluating various options, we chose to interview key informants who act as recognized spokespersons for various groups and organizations, rather than interviewing individuals who could only discuss their own personal experience.

From our previous work (literature review, collection of relevant news articles, field work), we selected institutions and groups to be contacted, attempting to cover the various sectors involved in the territorial dynamics of the area and take advantage of diverse perspectives. Moreover, we sought to interview people who could talk about the whole region, not just specific municipalities, while simultaneously attempting to contact people from municipalities with different dynamics. When we contacted the selected individuals, they sometimes suggested other names, some of which were added to the list of interviews.

Finally, we interviewed 25 people linked to various levels of government, to business and industry associations, professional associations, trade unions, civic organizations and neighbourhood associations (Table 1). Additionally, we interviewed 5 Catalan academics in order to capture points of view from informed individuals not directly involved with the processes analysed.

All 30 interviews consisted of open dialogue, allowing those interviewed to provide their perspectives on various aspects, including the advantages and disadvantages of urban growth, the causes of this growth, the motivations behind the different migration flows, the development of territorial dynamics, future prospects, etc.

4. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

This section describes the different forces that drive the transformation of settlements and the appearance of new urban development. It includes references to tourism and second homes, to migrations, and to the dynamics of the real estate market.

4.1 Tourism and second homes

First we will consider the importance of tourism and second homes in the processes of transformation and urban growth during the period analysed.

4.1.1 Development of tourist housing

Tourism and the demand for second homes tell part of the story of urban growth in the study period, especially along the coastline. In the interior, instead, the growth linked to tourism and second homes coexists with that related to primary residences. However, there is a certain differentiation between these two types of urban developments.

Table 1. List of Interviews

Public Administrators
Municipal Governments of Castelló d'Empúries, Sant Pere Pescador, Torroella de Fluvià, Viladamat and Vilajuïga
Natural Park Management, Aiguamolls de l'Alt Empordà
Tourism Office, Costa Brava - Girona
Catalan Government office for urban development in Girona
Business Associations of Girona and Alt Empordà
Hospitality Sector, Agricultural Sector, Agricultural Sector (Irrigation), Construction Sector and Developers. Chamber of Commerce
Professional Associations of Girona and Alt Empordà
Real Estate Agents, Surveyors and Technical Architects, Architects
Trade Unions (Alt Empordà Delegations)
Workers' Committees (CCOO), General Union of Workers (UGT) and Farmers' Union
Civic Groups and Associations
Neighbourhood Associations of Bon Relax (Sant Pere Pescador), Palau-Saverdera and El Temple (Castelló d'Empúries)
Foreign Neighbourhood Association (Sant Pere Pescador)
Citizens' Group against Massive Development (Castelló d'Empúries)
Citizens' Group to Save the Region (<i>Salvem l'Empordà</i>)
Academic Experts
Joan Cals, Oriol Nel·lo and Pere Serra (Autonomous University of Barcelona), Salvador Anton (University 'Rovira i Virgili') and Jaume Busquets (University of Barcelona)

First, the very concept of the settlement is different, for developers and users alike. The housing in tourism developments is often offered directly to an international audience by specialized advertising agencies, using arguments different from those used in the national market. These include generic references to the warm, sunny climate, the peace and tranquillity, or the Mediterranean landscape of vineyards and olive groves. A second difference is the physical appearance of the settlements as a whole and of the individual buildings. Although in both cases there is usually low-density housing (detached and semi-detached houses), the tourist settlements are usually built in areas that are isolated from major urban centres and repeat the styles used in built areas along the coastline, such as the circular towers that have proliferated there since the 1960s. Tourist settlements are also usually defined by controlled spaces and restricted access to anyone other than property owners. Finally, tourist settlements are often linked to a complementary opportunity for sports and recreation, which adds value and attempts to attract certain market segments.

Nonetheless, the tourist settlements developed in the interior for those in search of less crowded environments quickly entered a process previously experienced by coastal developments, as a large portion of the properties were transformed into primary residences:

There was a first phase, which they called the German settlement because the developer was a German company and because Germans bought or rented the houses (...), and at the time there were very few people who lived there year-round, (...) but there has been a second phase, still with a German developer but there have also been a lot of developers from here, (...), so you find that there are Catalans, there are people from different parts of Spain, there are Germans, Belgians, etc. (...) the situation has varied a lot. (...) There are couples with small children, and it is a family environment with people who really live there, maybe not all of them but many people do.

Foreign Neighbourhood Association, Sant Pere Pescador

4.1.2 *Tourism uses of traditional settlements*

If much of the growth in the area during the study period cannot be related to tourism, and even the housing developments that seemed to be tied to tourism begin to be converted to primary residences, we must ask what other forms of tourism uses can be found in the municipalities of the interior. Paradoxically, the traditional settlements are increasingly being used for tourism purposes, due to the changes experienced in the tourism sector. No longer limited to the coastline and the sole purpose of enjoying the sea and the beach, the new tourism has led to the conversion of existing older buildings into second homes. This is especially true in smaller towns, where houses that are vacant because of depopulation are acquired for rehabilitation as second homes. This trend, although it has promoted the restoration of many buildings, often of great architectural value and costly to maintain and repair, results in very different uses of the urban space on weekdays, when the villages are nearly shut down, and weekends, when they fill with activity:

People come from Barcelona who at one time had these houses restored, which was a good thing because the town was falling down. But if we had continued that process, we would have ended up like those villages that are converted into museums: Friday, Saturday, and Sunday there are people and then Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday there's nobody. (...) You go there during the week and you don't find anybody, there's nobody, there is no life.

Municipal government, Torroella de Fluvià

These villages appear physically attractive, but are devoid of activity and community life. In addition, these restoration processes often involve the recovery of a past that is now gone and require some reinvention, with the predominance of stone architecture as a distinctive element. In fact, not only rehabilitated buildings but new homes are built using supposedly traditional architectural parameters.

At the same time, hospitality infrastructure has increasingly been located inland, with hotel construction featuring small capacity but high quality, located in towns with attractive environments, together with the emergence of rural tourism, which has led to the restoration and reuse of old farmhouses. This increase in accommodation infrastructure in inland areas is related to the growing influx of resources and the artistic heritage of these places, among other things, which have contributed to the territorial extension of tourism.

4.2 **The migratory flows**

The impact of migratory flows in this territory must also be considered. These involve the arrival of people of varied origins and with different migratory motivations.

4.2.1 *Short-range migratory flows*

During the study period, population growth accelerated because of migration. This demographic growth was accompanied by a series of urban developments that, as mentioned above, were often not related to tourism and second residences.

This growth differed from that of urban developments more closely associated with tourism because it generally occurred as a continuation of existing urban centres. However, low density is a shared characteristic because both types of development were based on detached and semi-detached single-family houses. They also represent a break with traditional urban patterns, establishing a uniform cityscape repeated everywhere, regardless of location or the characteristics of a particular urban centre. Low-density residential developments meet a variety of housing demands related to a series of migratory flows that

can be considered “short-range” because they originate in the surrounding area (from local to regional context, including movements at the county level).

a) Local movements

In some municipalities there is displacement of the population towards low-density residential areas that are on the edge of existing towns. Therefore, these areas primarily absorb local demand for housing from families that cannot find a place to live in the centre of town or prefer to live in the new residential areas.

These local movements are related to various issues, generally associated with finding better housing conditions and the discomfort involved with living in the urban centre, in terms of urban fabric and building typology:

The old centre of town has some houses that are great to spend a weekend but to live there all the time, all year, a new house is better, one that's insulated, and sometimes it's much cheaper to build a new one than to fix up an old one.

They're stone houses, (...) and they are hard to fix up, hard to remodel, and then if you live in one of those houses, if you are there every day, (...) there is a lot more maintenance to be done.

Municipal government, Viladamat

Beyond this general aspect, some municipalities have more specific circumstances. As mentioned earlier, there are municipalities where many of the houses in the town centre have been purchased and renovated as second homes. In this case, young people who want to live independently from their parents either prefer new homes on the outskirts of town to older houses in the town centre or are forced there by the high price of owning, remodelling, and maintaining the older buildings, as strong demand for traditional construction makes them more expensive in the current market.

Yet another situation occurs in towns experiencing the arrival of populations from other continents that have settled in the central parts of town, in older houses available for rent. In these cases, the local population also tends to leave those areas and prefers to establish residence in new housing and the newer low-density residential areas:

When one house starts to fill up, then it starts and the people from town move to the outskirts. (...) People don't like to live together [with foreigners] yet. We don't yet have that custom, and especially not in villages (...) People who don't live in town and have houses that aren't in very good shape, they rent to them, or people rent to them and then leave, and they buy a detached house outside of town.

Municipal government, Sant Pere Pescador

b) Flows at the county level

These relocation processes are reinforced by similar relocation flows at the county level, also associated with access to housing. There are a series of such migrations, with complex patterns and differences in origin and destination:

First, there are displacements from the capital of the county, Figueres, to the largest populations on the coast. In these cases, most people acquire previously owned housing because the tourist developments built in the 60s and 70s created a large housing stock in these communities, making it possible to find the detached single-family housing they seek at a more reasonable price.

Second, migratory movements occur from Figueres to the mid-sized or small communities in the surrounding area. The destination for these flows is often the low-density housing built in these areas, as described above.

Third, there are displacements from the most developed coastal towns to mid-sized or small inland communities and, in the case of the smallest villages, from the mid-sized towns that in turn receive population from other places. In both cases, these migratory flows are usually directed to the new low-density residential areas.

Finally, in some cases the migration occurs in reverse, from the smallest towns to the biggest towns on the coast. This can be explained by the rise in housing prices during the study period and people coming from other larger places who find comparatively reasonable prices in these small towns. The difficulties of the local population to find housing increase and, paradoxically, they end up finding better opportunities in the large market of previously owned homes in the coastal towns:

The urban pressure that comes with this mobility means that a certain type of people increasingly comes to the villages and the local people, who have only normal purchasing power, find it hard to stay there.

The people who have left, more or less moved up [to smaller rural villages], (...), or to the first-line coastal towns with their thousands of empty apartments that people sell sometimes because they need the money.

Municipal government, Vilajuïga

In general, these migratory movements in the county setting can be related to several circumstances:

On one hand, those who move to the new, low-density residential areas of small towns are often middle-aged couples with children who make the change to find better housing. These movements are explained in part by the speed of travel in the area because the distances are relatively short, the terrain is flat, and there has been growth and improvement in the road network.

On the other hand, the search for a real or perceived improvement in quality of life, more tranquillity, less noise, more open space or proximity to nature is often the reason for these short-range migratory flows. The possibility of access to services similar to a larger town in less congested surroundings also influences these decisions.

Finally, for some of those who move within the county, the presence of a large immigrant population from outside the European Community in certain neighbourhoods of Figueres is another circumstance that can affect the decision to leave the city.

Regardless of all these aspects, however, one question is definitive in the motivation to migrate: the difference in housing prices in different areas, and therefore in the possibility of finding housing in the best possible condition at a comparatively reasonable price:

The initial motivation to take the step of leaving one's natural environment, where you have family, is that if I can't find something here that I can afford I'm going to look for it as close to home as possible, taking into account that the distances are really small;

Whether it is a primary need or making a positive change there is a main motivation (...), and it is generalized: it's the price, product for product; and then you add in many other things, but that's the main motivation.

Construction Sector and Developers of Girona

c) Regional flows

There are also people who move to the area from Girona or even Barcelona. Such people, whether professionally active or retired, locate in the low-density residential areas inland or in the tourist settlements on the coast, whether in new buildings or previously owned housing. Those who are still working, and continue to work in their places of origin, in some cases make daily trips, but sometimes work remotely from their home, thanks to information and communication technology and commute only once or twice a week to resolve issues that require their presence.

These flows correspond to motivational parameters similar to those described for displacements in a local context and at a county level. From a broader perspective, one would

add the comparative advantages of the Alt Empordà, especially in terms of proximity and quick communication to various places of potential interest:

The Alt Empordà is really good because you are 10 minutes from Figueres, a half hour from Girona, an hour and a half from Barcelona, and if you want you can go to Perpignan... You're just well connected with everything. (...) If you want mountains, beach, city... You're close to everything, so it's a really good place to live.

Neighbourhood Association of El Temple, Castelló d'Empúries

4.2.2 *Flows from Northern Europe*

The impact of short-range migration is complemented by other migratory currents from farther away. Most of all, this is the case of flows originating in Northern European countries. Most of the people who participate in these migrations are retirees who come to these areas either permanently or for seasonal stays.

This population often responds to a classic dynamic, generalized throughout the Mediterranean context, which is setting up a residence upon retirement in the second-home developments designed for tourism. The new element is that now the housing is often purchased specifically for this purpose, rather than as a second home, and the phenomenon is not limited to retirees; now, given the improvements in communication and transportation and the role of new technologies, this is also possible for people who are still active in the workforce.

In any case, the major motivation is the quest for a better quality of life, which is associated with leisure. A crucial aspect is to enjoy the sunny days, unlike their countries of origin. To this "appetite" for sunshine, then you can add other issues, such as the possibility to enjoy a lifestyle that is perceived as more relaxed. Another important question is the availability of quality healthcare services similar to their home countries, although language can be a handicap. This issue is highly valued, and influences the decision to return to their place of origin that some people take when they reach a certain age:

For healthcare services, the Germans go to Roses, where there is a centre with German doctors, (...), and they speak German. (...) I think there are better doctors in Figueres, but there is the question of the language (...) and the dentist is the same: in Castelló d'Empúries there is a dentist whose mother is German, and they all go there.

On this street, there was a German couple who had lived here more than 20 years, and last year they sold it and went back to Germany because they're afraid to be here, they're afraid about getting sick... Many speak only German, (...), and they're afraid.

Neighbourhood Association of Bon Relax, Sant Pere Pescador

In the end, these movements may also be linked to economic concerns, whether in relation to the housing itself or to the cost of living in general, which had been lower than the countries of origin until a certain point in time. Nonetheless, the real estate bubble that occurred during the study period, and increased cost of living overall, made the sunshine an even more determining factor in the attraction of this area:

The climate makes it cheaper to live here, apart from being more pleasant, (...), because you spend less on heating, but that doesn't make up for the fact that the things you buy are often more expensive than there. Before, (...), with a German income, I came here and lived like a king, but now, no, if they want to come here, they have to save up. Now the only reason for foreigners to come to Spain is the sun.

Neighbourhood Association of Bon Relax, Sant Pere Pescador

The increased migratory flows from Northern Europe has an impact –not exclusively, but decisively, on the growing residential nature of the tourism developments, and in the increasing importance of *residentialism* as second homes are converted to primary residences.

The paradigm for this phenomenon is Empuriabrava, a large residential marina situated in Castelló d'Empúries, although it has also been occurring in other housing developments of the coastal and inland areas, where there is a wide range of experiences. Some people live there, or spend long seasons there, but do not register as residents; others live there and are registered; and some people are registered for tax purposes but the property is only a second home. This diversity often makes it difficult to assess the phenomenon, even for the town councils, which are often not aware of the full impact of this population.

Finally, from an overall perspective, and focusing attention on the larger coastal towns (Roses, L'Escala or even Empuriabrava), *residentialism* contributed to making these tourist centres into actual cities. This may have been the strategy of some municipalities, transforming a tourist colony into a true residential city, with urban features and functions, in order to improve its overall quality and competitiveness.

4.2.3 Global flows

The arrival of migratory flows from Eastern Europe or other continents also contributed notably to population growth in many of these municipalities.

In most cases, these migrations were a response to the need to find employment opportunities and were fundamental to the good economic performance of the region during the study period. They also generated a strong demand for housing, which tended to be previously owned homes located in urban areas. Therefore, the demand created by this immigrant population reactivated housing stock that had been considered inadequate because of the poor quality construction and obsolescence. It also allowed the owners a lawful –but ethically debatable– way to increase their profit, taking advantage of the difficult circumstances faced by this population.

On one hand, these new arrivals settled in the centres of towns, in empty houses that were affordable because they were in poor condition. On the other hand, this population also locates in tourist settlements, even though a priori it may seem strange, in the lower quality housing (for example, where there are apartment buildings full of small apartments), because these also offer lower rents than would be found in more desirable properties. Once again, Empuriabrava is a good example because in certain areas there is a concentration of tall apartment buildings; however, there is a similar dynamic in other housing developments along the coast. This type of housing has the disadvantage that the owners often raise the rent in the summer, an increase tenants must accept if they do not want to leave the apartment during these months:

So now these are rented, and they're pretty expensive. (...) And [the owners] also claimed the summer months, July and August, because otherwise they would charge higher rent. So these are apartments that are used in a one way during the summer and in another way in the winter or else they change a lot more for the summer months if you want to stay there.

Foreign Neighbourhood Association, Sant Pere Pescador

In some cases, given the difficulty of finding affordable rents in certain towns affected by seasonal tourism and the reluctance of some owners to rent their properties, foreign immigrants may have decided to buy housing, taking advantage of the deals offered by financial institutions during this period to sign mortgage contracts. Often, these buyers found their properties in certain neighbourhoods of Figueres, with low-quality planning and construction, and in some cases quite isolated and away from the city centre. People with limited purchasing power, often of non-European Union origin, began to become increasingly

concentrated in these neighbourhoods, which sometimes results in a deterioration in their quality of life if they had been well established in a smaller town and their living conditions were quite good:

Then what has happened is that they have moved, in other words, people who were in relatively small towns, (...) people who had a very pleasant life, and they were pretty well integrated, where did they find a house to buy? (...), in one of the neighbourhoods in Figueres,

And so then I've run into some of these people, who after a while tell me that they are not happy, things are not good, they don't like it ...

Foreign Neighbourhood Association, Sant Pere Pescador

4.3 The dynamics of the real estate market

Finally, we must consider the impact of the upward dynamics of the real estate market. In addition to the demand linked to primary or secondary residences, during these years an added demand factor was the use of housing for its exchange value.

The whole of the Costa Brava, beginning with the tourism development of the 1960s, has long experienced a real estate investment. During the study period, however, the consequences of the speculative bubble generated by the high concentration of capital in real estate were added to the traditional dynamic of tourism-related construction.

Real estate markets became more dynamic in Spain in the mid-90s, at a time of economic recovery, and ended in a large real estate boom that extended well into the first decade of the present century. At that time, a series of factors coincided: lower interest rates, lower stock market returns, implementation of the European currency, etc. All of these elements helped to make real estate a very profitable investment, which increased demand. Increasing property values encouraged the use of housing as a savings or investment account, and this launched the housing market into an enormous upward spiral, further increasing housing costs.

The upward price trend made this area, which was no exception to the market dynamic, experience a rapid increase in housing costs. The price increases affected homebuyers as well as renters, regardless of whether the unit was new construction or previously owned, located in a city centre or a tourism development or a low-density residential development, because what increased the most was mainly the price of land.

During the study period (1996-2006), demand related to the exchange value of the property took on great importance. This type of purchase, intended as an investment (or speculation), became widespread, ranging from transactions with a high business volume conducted by large investors –often operating at the international level– to activity involving the most local businessperson or family nest egg.

These operations would influence the transformation of urban settlements and the emergence of new urbanization processes because a large portion of these properties were not acquired for any specific use, but rather to obtain a profit. This meant that a large number of houses would stand empty:

There are also many people who buy a place as an investment. I know a lot of people my age [she is in their forties] who are investing. They have their main residence and they are buying a second one, but not for second-home tourism, it's to have an investment, a reserve for the day they retire or if they need it at some point, to sell it – they're speculating.

Municipal government, Castelló d'Empúries

These situations reinforced the price spiral that they helped to trigger, raising housing costs even more. The high cost of housing had repercussions for background processes such as migratory flows linked to the search for housing. These flows tend to increase because the population must search harder, and move farther away, to find the needed housing at an affordable price.

Finally, this set of interlocking elements resulted in an increasingly serious housing problem for many sectors of society: young people, the elderly, single-parent families, etc. Similarly, the rising cost of housing affected many of the dynamics discussed in this article, such as local flows linked to a search for housing within a town or county, or the waves of homebuyers from northern Europe, who began to invest in other markets. Therefore, the rise in real estate prices ended up causing a slowdown in demand, and prospective homebuyers also faced growing difficulties in securing mortgage approval or simply had no opportunity to make a deal in the first place, due to the rise in interest rates (until 2008) and the onset of the economic crisis, which led to job losses and rising unemployment.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In this article we have analysed the driving forces of urban transformation in the northern Costa Brava (Catalonia, Spain). The study was conducted on the plain of Alt Empordà, a singular region that combines urban spaces for tourism and non-tourism uses with rural and natural areas, making it a good laboratory for analysing the processes of urbanization that affect these types of spaces and settlements.

During the real estate boom in Spain (1996-2006), the study area experienced a series of growth processes in coastal areas that led to urbanization of the interior areas, which until then had remained predominantly rural. In these inland areas, we find low-density development on the outskirts of existing centres that respond to a part of the population's search for better housing conditions, coexisting with new tourist housing development seeking quality surroundings that are less crowded in the interior, compared to the coast.

At the same time, changes in tourism trends may involve the use of traditional settlements, with the restoration of most of the properties as second homes; this process raises real estate prices, making it difficult for local people to afford housing. At other times, the urban centres face neglect and decay and become affordable housing for immigrants of non-European origin while the local population prefers to move to new residential areas on the periphery.

Finally, much of the tourist housing is being converted to primary residences. On one hand, former tourists from Northern Europe are making their permanent retirement homes there. On the other hand, former tourist housing with less appeal is becoming homes for immigrants from other continents.

This series of transformations can be explained by a complex set of factors. They vary in nature, operate at different territorial levels (from local to international contexts), may act simultaneously and are often interrelated, and contribute both to extensive urban sprawl and to remarkable population growth.

During the study period, significant demands for housing of various kinds converged on the plain of Alt Empordà, in part related to tourism and demand for second homes, but also related to different types of population flows: short-range migration, linked to the search for housing and driven by the price differential between different areas; continental migration, mainly Northern Europeans who come to the area in search of a better quality of life; and finally intercontinental migration, primarily flows related to a search for greater employment opportunities.

Therefore, the effects of migration flows during these years have been combined with the impact of tourism and its new manifestations, and were greatly amplified by the upward trends in housing values, which generated additional demand related to the exchange value compared to the use value of a property, with housing used as a means of savings and investment or simply for speculation.

The combination of these different driving forces means that Alt Empordà can no longer be considered only as a tourist destination. Rather, we observed mixed uses and types of

settlement, which increased the complexity of the territorial and urban patterns as they were affected by different waves and processes of urbanization.

In short, the plain of Alt Empordà can be a paradigm for many other coastal areas of Catalonia, Spain and the rest of Mediterranean Europe that experienced a tourism impact in the mid-20th century and more complex dynamics at the turn of the century, resulting from the socioeconomic transformations at the global level (financialization of the economy, real estate investment, increased mobility flows, etc.).

This region has witnessed changing territorial patterns that combine different types of urban growth (metropolitan suburbanization, rural sprawl, and the transformation of mature tourism destinations). Based on this process, which fits the phenomenon described as "metropolization of territory" (Indovina 2003), the different urban systems in Catalonia have been reconfigured. A new urban hierarchy has appeared that works as a single functional unit, as a "city of cities" (Nel·lo 2002).

It is true that the bursting of the housing bubble and the subsequent economic crisis changed the dynamics of urbanization, slowing and even halted the trends analysed here for a time. However, it is equally true that the dynamics of dispersing the population and their activities have not disappeared. The various driving forces of urban transformation outlined here will continue acting in the future. We must assume that the phenomenon of metropolization is already an irreversible fact in large areas of Mediterranean Europe that must be planned for and managed, despite the difficulties of the current scenario with the limitations on public spending that are especially conspicuous in the countries of southern Europe.

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