

BENI-YORK VERSUS MARBELLA BEACH

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Two cities of Spain, two tourism paradises, two moments in history and two different ways of urban development.

On the one hand, Benidorm, a city with an estimated population around 71.000 inhabitants (2009) and an extra of 350.000 foreign tourists. Its density: 1,84 inhab/sq mi).

On the other hand, Marbella, a city with a population census around 135.000 inhabitants (2009) which can grow until 500.000 in the summer. Its density: 1,1 inhab/sq mi).

How has all this agglomeration of mass tourism been translated into a development and an image of the city? How has it influenced on the urban fabric, landscape and architecture? That is the starting point of this study: two models of urban development, responding to different political moments: Benidorm flourished during the fascist Franco regime and Marbella during the opening up of the Spanish economy and resulting construction boom, but is above all the result of an incredibly corrupt political system. The result is two cities with two totally different images, one of vertical development and the second one, a horizontal sprawl. Two perverse systems that make mass tourism possible, on the account of scarce natural resources

Let's introduce first Benidorm...

What the moors originally called Beni-Darhim, what in 1950s was a modest fishing village situated in the East coast of Spain, is nowadays Benidorm, a vast container for package tourism and also well-known by made-up words such as BeniYork or Touropolis. Benidorm's skyline could be perfectly Manhattan's skyline but with the difference that all these skinny Benidorm's skyscrapers are hotels or apartments to accommodate an enormous concentration of tourism.

The most interesting point of the birth of Benidorm's development is the way the city becomes a great focus of tourism and consequently how its urban image takes shape.

Who is then the father of the modern Benidorm?

His name is Pedro Zaragoza Orts and he was appointed mayor of Benidorm in the 1950s. It was the period of the Franco regime in Spain and mayor Pedro Zaragoza dared to sign a municipal order authorising the wearing of bikinis without asking permission from anyone (wearing bikinis was censored in Spain at this time). With this welcome to the bikini the first blonde northern Europeans tourists began arriving and the first fruits of Pedro Zaragoza's dream of Benidorm becoming a new tourist resort were beginning to ripen.

There were, of course, circumstances that formed the mayor's ideas related to his new plans for the city. Residents of the village of Benidorm always had problems with water supplies and besides, the ground was too dry for agriculture but... they had a nice climate, mild temperatures during the whole year and the beach. Pedro Zaragoza didn't hesitate: the future development of the city was tourism.

Thereby in the 1950s Pedro Zaragoza Orts designed the urban plan of the modern Benidorm to become a tourism middle-class superpower. He drew wide boulevards and avenues where only olive and almond trees grew. At this moment, the high-rise urban development was born. Planning permissions for a piece of land were granted on basis of the building volume (so many cubic metres of building per square metres of land). Therefore, by designing high-rise blocks there would be more space for gardens, swimming pools, parking and sport fields. And that is what Benidorm became: crowded hotels following a typological pattern across the city but still light and airy on the ground.

The result is astonishing; no less than 5 million tourists visit the city each year and there are six times as many hotel beds in Benidorm as in the whole Portuguese Algarve. Its reputation of the most ordinary and vulgar tourist destination in Europe is wide spread.



High-rise in Benidorm

After this introduction of Benidorm it is the turn of Marbella.

Let's say that Marbella is the other extreme of Spanish tourism: designer boutiques, wealth, glamour clubs and ornamental opulence. Marbella's summers are famous because it's the favourite destination for Spanish celebrities, Northern Europeans yachtsmen, golfers and tennis-players as well as Russian and Italian mafia. What in society is called the "jet set" and last but not least Saudi Arabia's royal family with a great retinue of around 3000 people accountable for a great deal of the city's economy (unfortunately the monarch Fahd died in 2005).

Marbil-la, another name given by the moors during the Islamic era, began making contact with its luxury tourism in 1950s when a German aristocrat, Alfonso de Hohenlohe, arrived by chance to this place. Alfonso was so impressed of this area that he decided to buy land commercially and market the area as a tourist destination. In 1954 he opened the Marbella Club Hotel and consequently, Marbella would start growing slowly until the 1970s when it reached the status of a Mecca for the wealthy, becoming an ostentatious and pretentious resort of luxury, though lacking the most simple public facilities.

Who is then the father of the modern Marbella?

The uncontrolled growth of Marbella and fast-expanding sprawl was overseen by Jesús Gil y Gil, millionaire property developer, and mayor in the 1990s and already infamous in Spain. He permitted a great freedom to build, handing out building licences destructing the existing urban plan approved by the government in 1986. During the Spanish decade-long building boom, Mr Gil improved his personal fortunes, through corruption and speculation, using his position in the Town Hall of Marbella working together

with developers and collaborators. Mafia and corruption spread in the city and an estimated amount of 30.000 illegal constructions were built in this period.

After years of speculation, the biggest system of corruption ever known in a Spanish Town Hall was uncovered. From 2007 the provisional municipal government has been working on a new urban plan for the future of Marbella. This summer 2010 a new municipal plan has been revealed aimed at sorting out the mess and chaos.



Mayor of Marbella (1991-1999) Jesús Gil y Gil

Assimilating all this first information, we find two opposite ways of urban development: Benidorm's model which packs the massive tourism vertically in the city and around the coastline, and Marbella's model, horizontally, devastating and devouring everything in its path and destructing the last few green islands along the beachside.

Benidorm represents a plan, hard work and determination and on the other hand, Marbella means corruption and uncontrolled evolution. Marbella has a lack of public facilities (educational, cultural and green areas) due to all these years of private benefits that Benidorm doesn't have.

The research will be concentrated on the following themes: What effect does the corruption have on the urban fabric; could we speak of a corrupt space or plan? How can a city recover from a great lack of public facilities as result of years of corruption? How can we compare these two urban developments? We have already mentioned the vertical model versus the horizontal one but we could also compare the generic versus exclusive, the ordinary versus the glamorous image and the democratic versus the corrupt urbanism.

It would also be interesting to analyse these two models related to sustainability and environmental impact. How do the models connect to their surroundings and resources? What result does the dynamic of the coming and going of 5 million people per year have (spatially) on a city and society? Is this a place for living or place for leisure? Is there a connection between visitors and the qualities of the place or could these cities be anywhere? What impact has the recent crisis on the development of these cities?

To conclude, two Spanish touristic resorts, exemplary for the continuous evolutions of -and theories on- the contemporary city and periphery, resulting very interesting for further research.