

# TOURIST DEVELOPMENT AND PLANNING ON THE VALENCIAN MEDITERRANEAN COAST: THE CASE OF LA DEVESA DEL SALER

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## ABSTRACT

It is known that the Spanish Mediterranean coast, and particularly the Valencian coast, has been the subject of an intense process of urban development since the 1960s. This process has been caused by both the increase in economic activities as a basis for the growth of cities and by the development of tourism along almost the entire coastline. Some cases have been studied in detail, such as the case of La Manga del Mar Menor, where massive tourist development took place. In the case of La Devesa de L'Albufera de València, its beginnings are similar to those of La Manga. In both cases, there is a similar coastal environment with a narrow strip of land between a large lake on one side, the Mar Menor lake and the Albufera lake, and the Mediterranean Sea on the other. However, from a certain point in time, the two areas evolved differently. In the case of La Manga, urban tourist development continued until the collapse of the real estate market due to the reduced attractiveness of the landscape. In contrast, the area of La Devesa del Saler began as a tourist urban development in a similar way, but, in the 1970s, a social movement emerged against its urbanization. This social movement gained strength progressively, until tourism development initiatives were paralyzed and the area protected for its environmental value. The case is the object of a doctoral thesis entitled "The mountain of La Devesa del Saler: the paradigm shift in mass tourism", and this paper focuses on the results of a part of this research, specifically the identification of the main historical milestones that explain the evolution of the process in the case of La Devesa del Saler.

*Keywords:* urban planning, tourism development, coastal development, environmental paradigm changes.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The place named *La Devesa del Saler* is a sandy land between the Albufera lagoon and the Mediterranean Sea, located 10 km south of Valencia city. The area is about 8 km long and 1 km wide. The geological morphology of this zone is similar to that of all the wetlands of the Iberian Mediterranean coast: the north-south marine currents sweep along sands and form a dune strip that closes the gulfs to form lagoons separated from the sea by the said dune strip. We can see other similar forms in the case of the Mar Menor lagoon in Murcia (Spain). The main difference in these cases is the water conditions of the lagoons. The Mar Menor is a salt-water lagoon with an area of 170 km<sup>2</sup> and a depth ranging from 3 to 6 m. The dune strip, called *La Manga*, is about 20 km along and 0.5 km wide, almost without vegetation. However, La Albufera is a freshwater lake and the dune strip of *La Devesa* is a leafy Mediterranean forest with rich fauna and flora next to the lake.

At the beginning, the surface of Albufera Lake was larger than currently, and the lake and the Devesa land were public property. Nevertheless, especially in the 19th century, an important part of the lake was transformed to rice lands [1]–[4]. Fig. 1 shows the current morphology of Albufera Lake, with the lake, the rice lands around the lake and the dune strip and forest of La Devesa between the lake and the Mediterranean Sea. The lake connects with the Mediterranean Sea through canals named "golas". All canals have lock-gates to close the water flood from the lake to the sea. In this case, the lake level increases and the rice fields are flooded.





Figure 1: Albufera Lake, rice lands and the Devesa in the metropolitan area of Valencia. (Source: Google Earth, 2017.)

In 1959, the Spanish government approved the Economic Stabilization Plan. This plan allowed Spanish borders to be open to commercial exchange and foreign tourists. In fact, this plan ended the self-sufficient economic period and started the period of integrating the Spanish economy into the world.

According to this plan, in 1962, the Law of Centres and National Tourist Interest Areas was approved, to promote many coastal tourist resorts such as La Manga, created since 1963 out of nowhere. Many of these initiatives evolved into mass tourism, which has caused and continues to cause important environmental impacts. That is the case of La Manga [5]–[8].

However, this has not always been the case. There are exceptions, such as the case of the Devesa of Saler. The Devesa of Saler has similar characteristics to those of La Manga for starting touristic urban development. In addition, the territory of the Devesa was public

property and, consequently, meant easy public promotion of tourist development. In fact, this development started.

Nevertheless, from about the 1970s, a social movement also started in favour of protecting this area against the tourist development that was going to destroy the ecosystems. In about 10-15 years, the social conceptual framework or social imagination changed from defending urban tourist development as a synonym of economic progress to defending the environmental value of this place.

The execution of the project began but was paralyzed, and the area was protected. In fact, the paradigm changed, social values changed and the way of thinking of the majority among Valencian society changed. Consequently, the way of understanding how planning uses this territory also changed.

Therefore, despite the similar geomorphology in the cases of La Manga and La Devesa, the planning and urban development of both territories has differed greatly, with very different results after 50–60 years.

## 2 OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

Today, a doctoral thesis is in progress about how and why this paradigm change has occurred in the case of La Devesa del Saler. The general objective of this research is to discover, through original historical documents, the landmarks that describes the process of change, in order to understand the structural causes that explain it.

This paper focuses on a part of this research: particularly, the main historical landmarks that allows us to identify the historical changes in five issues: society, environment, property, public works and urban planning.

The methodologies used to identify the landmarks are those of historical research: the analysis of historical documents to identify landmarks. The sources used for the historical research are historical publications, historical newspapers, historical TV programs and films, a historical exhibition about different actions for and against the urban development of La Devesa, brochures with different objectives, original documents of different urban plans and approved laws, a workshop organized about L'Albufera, and interviews with different stakeholders.

Based on these historical analyses, the authors identify three phases of paradigm change:

- Pre-paradigm: the original situation before tourism began as a social activity.
- Initial paradigm: tourist urban development represents progress, and society needs this progress to improve its life.
- Changing paradigm: some people, individually or collectively, manifest their ideas against urban development at any price. Progress that destroys natural resources is not progress.
- New paradigm: Ecosystems, natural resources and environmental values are more important than progress understood as maximising incomes in the short term, no matter what.

In the following sections, the authors show the main landmarks in each phase.

## 3 PRE-PARADIGM. LA DEVESA BEFORE TOURISM

To understand the process, it is necessary to understand the historical evolution of the property of La Devesa, which we explain synthetically. Since the medieval age (1238 when King Jaume I conquered the Muslim Kingdom of Valencia), the territory of La Devesa had been Royal Heritage. In 1865, the list of Royal Heritage of Queen Isabel II excluded the



territory of La Devesa, which happened to be a state asset. The objective was the disentanglement (freeing of property) of territory (sale of lands by the state to private entities), but only a part was sold. We can fix the year 1865 as the start of this pre-paradigmatic period. The period lasted until 1964.

In 1880, the first demarcation of the plot of La Devesa was carried out. In 1901, La Devesa was declared as a Forest of Public Utility, a means of protection, to prevent it from being sold. These forests were selected to be maintained as forests.

In 1911, by law, the Albufera Lake and La Devesa were transferred to Valencia municipality, on the condition that they maintained the forest.

In 1958, El Saler camping was introduced – the first touristic activity in the area.

As already indicated, in 1959, the Spanish government approved the Economic Stabilization Plan, and, in 1962, the Law of Centres and National Tourist Interest Areas was approved. The area of La Devesa was selected to become a tourist resort like La Manga.

In 1964, Law 225/64 on the regulations of La Devesa Forest was approved. This law eliminated the protection of the forest; the forest was excluded from the list of Public Forests and, consequently, its urban development was allowed.

#### 4 INITIAL PARADIGM. URBAN TOURISTIC DEVELOPMENT

This period ran from 1964 until 1978. In Figs 2, 3 and 4, the urban development project of Architect Cano Lasso can be seen.



Figure 2: Mock-up of project of Architect Cano Lasso for La Devesa. General view.  
(Source: historical exhibition of project.)



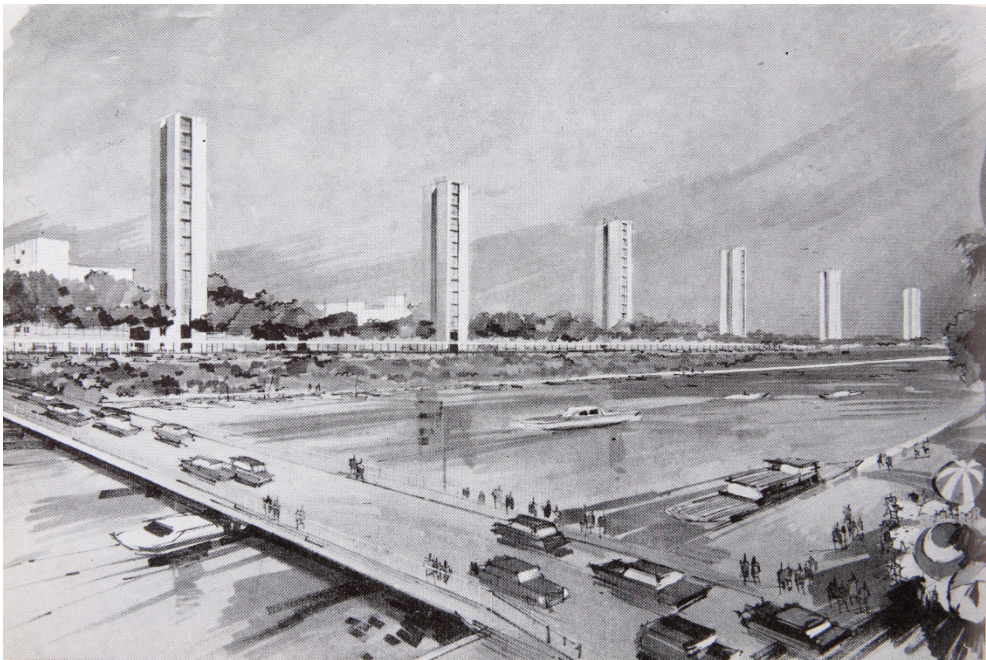


Figure 3: Visual image of final urban landscape of Arquitect Cano Lasso Project for La Devesa. (*Source: historical exhibition of project.*)

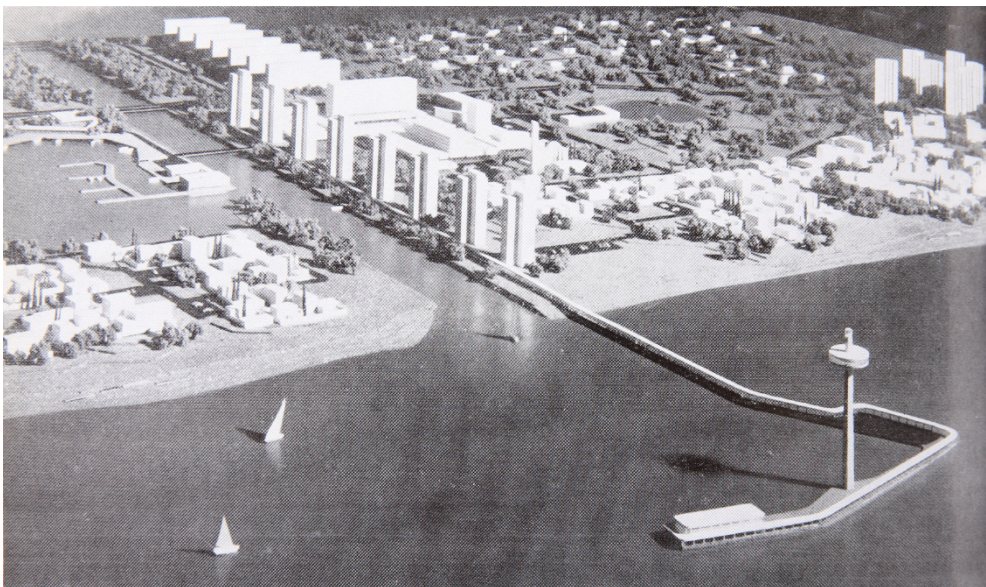


Figure 4: Mock-up of project of Arq. Cano Lasso for La Devesa. Detail of artificial lake next to Gola del Pujol that connects Albufera Lake with the Mediterranean Sea. (*Source: historical exhibition of project.*)

Table 1 shows the main landmarks of this period. At the start of this period, the dominant paradigm was the tourist urban development of La Devesa as a means of economic progress. Architect Cano Lasso [9] came up with the first idea of the urban design for the new urban development of La Devesa. This design accords with modern-movement architecture theories. However, in fact, Cano's project was never carried out due to the successive modifications. Several authors, such as Calduch [10], Fernández de la Reguera [11], Blasco [12], Martínez-Median and Oliva [13], Pie and Rosa [14], Pie [15] and Carcelén González [16], among others, studied this project.

Table 1: Main landmark in period of initial paradigm, 1964–1978.

Year	Society	Environment	Property	Urban development	Urban planning
1964		Protection of Devesa forest removed	Land segregation for Parador Hotel and golf course		Law on new regulations for use of La Devesa
1965					La Devesa Urban Plan approved
1968				Public works on the urban development of La Devesa began	
1969					La Devesa Urban Plan changed
1970	Broadcast of famous TV program, <i>Wild Fauna</i> , about L'Albufera		Plot auction for construction		
1973	Article series "The Spring" began in <i>Las Provincias</i> journal				
1974	Spring action of <i>El Saler for the People</i> movement				
1975	Dictator Franco's death				National Land Law reformed
1977	The first <i>Music Meeting at El Saler</i>				
1978	Second <i>Music Meeting at El Saler</i>				Final version of La Devesa Urban Plan approved



The initial proposal of Architect Cano Lasso projected an urban development of 32 large hotels, 162 other hotels, one Parador Hotel, 2,250 apartments in buildings of 15 floors, 700 apartments in buildings of 10 floors, 5,900 coastal houses, 207 forest houses and 148 houses for workers. In addition, the project included a long list of cultural facilities, sporting areas and nautical facilities.

1970 saw the first public opinions in favour of protecting L'Albufera Lake and La Devesa, such as those expressed in the TV program *Wild Fauna* by Félix Rodríguez de la Fuente, a famous naturalist and journalist, in order to protect L'Albufera Lake because of its fauna.

Over a considerable period of time, a long list of authors studied the natural characteristics of this ecosystem, for example Felipe and Vizcaino [17], or the relationship between the people that work in this ecosystem, such as Hamilton [18], among many others. Figs 5–7 show some details of L'Albufera's landscape.



Figure 5: Fauna on L'Albufera Lake.



Figure 6: L'Albufera landscape, Catarroja Port.



Figure 7: L'Albufera landscape and ecosystem.

Progressively, people in favour of protecting L'Albufera Lake and La Devesa, meeting as a popular movement, began to organize events to sensitize the population in favour of its objectives. This movement has also been studied by a long list of authors such as Cucó [19], Hamilton [20], Sorribes and Monrabal [21] and Alba Pagán and Vasileva Ivanova [22].

In addition, the role of Valencian journals, particularly *Las Provincias* journal, was essential and decisive, as studied by Alba Pagán and Vasileva Ivanova [22], Mateu and Domínguez [23], [24] and Mateu [25]. Today, this newspaper is ideologically conservative, but, at that time, it played a decisive role in this issue.

## 5 CHANGING PARADIGM. PEOPLE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES

We can accept that this period extends from 1979 to 1986, when the Natural Park of L'Albufera was approved as a protected area. Table 2 shows the main landmarks for this period.

In this period, the new democratic political organization, which accepted and helped the popular movement in favour of protecting L'Albufera, won the elections and, once in government, started to change the situation. The new paradigm won when the Natural Park of L'Albufera was approved in 1986. Currently, as you can see in Fig. 8, a part of La Devesa forest has already been transformed, but the regeneration of a big part of the ecosystem is possible.



Table 2: Main landmarks of period of changing paradigm.

Year	Society	Environment	Property	Urban development	Urban planning
1979	First democratic elections to local and regional governments				
1980		First official study to manage La Devesa forest			
1981		Revising municipal garden centre			
1982		First works to regenerate dunes			
1983		La Devesa Special Protected Plan approved	The municipality starts to buy back the plots previously auctioned to avoid construction		La Devesa Special Urban Renovation Plan approved
1986		L'Albufera Natural Park approval			



Figure 8: La Devesa forest today, with a part already urbanized and built on. (Source: Google Earth, 2017.)



## 6 NEW PARADIGM. ECOLOGICAL TOURISM

From this time, the new paradigm developed and the objective for this area changed from mass tourism to ecological tourism, as described by Muñoz Flores [26]. The new paradigm has been accepted by a social majority from 1986 to now. Table 3 shows the main landmarks of this period. During this period, the importance of the Natural Park of Albufera (hereafter, NPA) has increased progressively: in 1988 was protected as a Special Protected Zone for Birds (ZEPA for its acronym in Spanish) and in 1989 was declared Ramsar area (according to Ramsar *Convention*)

Now, L'Albufera and La Devesa constitute a metropolitan quasi-natural area next to about 1,800,000 people, with a very good beach and high potential for ecological tourism. Today's problems are focused on maintaining activities without endangering the natural values of the park. The new paradigm is now fully consolidated, and society believes that this area has a high natural value as opposed to its urbanization, which the scientists studied [27].

Table 3: Mainly landmarks in new paradigm period.

Year	Society	Environment	Property	Urban development	Urban planning
1988		NPA becomes area ZEPA Second phase regenerating dunes	Coastal Law approved	First phase demolition of public works	New Urban Plan of Valencia approved
1989		NPA becomes Ramsar area			
1992					Land Law second reform
1993		NPA legal status approved			
1994		Natural Land Protected Law approved			
1995		Natural Resources Albufera Plan approved			
2000		Third phase regenerating dunes	The municipality finalizes buying back the auctioned plots	Second phase of demolition of public works	
2004		Management and Uses Albufera Plan approved			
2007		Natural Heritage and Biodiversity Law approved			
2009	“Proyecto de Seducción Ambiental” (Environmental Attraction Project)	La Devesa forest returned to a public forest			
2013			Coastal Law change		
2016	Devesa Day started June 3				



## 7 CONCLUSIONS

The research shows that the process of changing the social imagination regarding the way to act in the territory is slow and contradictory. From an initial paradigm, the social majority progressively changed to another paradigm that justified another way of acting in the territory, another way of thinking about the territory, another range of values, of benefits and expenses, monetary or non-monetary.

Finally, the stakeholders, who participated in the actions to change the paradigm, became aware of acting directly for their own future, generating their own collective identity and history.

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