

SUSTAINABILITY OF URBAN HERITAGE

CASE STUDY IN ALTEA AND LA VILA JOIOSA (ALICANTE, SPAIN)

LA SOSTENIBILIDAD DEL PATRIMONIO URBANO
ESTUDIO DE CASO EN ALTEA Y LA VILA JOIOSA (ALICANTE, ESPAÑA)

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Los conjuntos históricos constituyen enclaves urbanos de alto interés patrimonial. Son espacios fundacionales de la ciudad destinados originalmente al hábitat. Han representado un paradigma de la noción de barrio y un referente de modelo sostenible urbano, social y económico en la cultura mediterránea europea. El fenómeno turístico puede ser una valiosa herramienta de impulso económico en esos ámbitos, pero existe el riesgo de que la sostenibilidad urbana acabe derivando en una mera explotación económica. Esta investigación realiza un estudio de caso sobre dos conjuntos históricos del levante español, representativos de la cultura urbana mediterránea, que están experimentando estos procesos, Altea y La Vila Joiosa. Se ha empleado una metodología analítica basada en indicadores multidimensionales de sostenibilidad urbana más orientados hacia lo funcional y social que a lo material. Los resultados presentan convergencias con los principales estudios del marco teórico, pero también algunos matices derivados de particularidades económicas, sociales y culturales de los conjuntos analizados en cuanto a población, vivienda y usos. Las conclusiones recalcan la importancia de asentar la imagen urbana, apoyarse en el arraigo ciudadano, evitar la privatización del espacio público y apostar por un turismo sostenible.

Palabras clave: sostenibilidad, patrimonio urbano, espacio público, turismo.

Historical ensembles are urban areas of considerable heritage interest. They are foundational spaces of the city originally intended for habitat. They have represented a paradigm of the notion of the neighborhood, and a benchmark for a sustainable urban, social, and economic model in European Mediterranean culture. The tourism phenomenon can be a valuable tool to boost the economy in these areas, but there is a risk that urban sustainability will end up leading to mere economic exploitation. This research makes a case study on two historical ensembles of the Spanish Levante, representative of Mediterranean urban culture, which are undergoing these processes, Altea and La Vila Joiosa. An analytical methodology has been used based on multidimensional urban sustainability indicators that are more oriented towards the functional and social than the material. The results show convergences with the main studies on this theoretical framework, but also some nuances derived from the economic, social, and cultural particularities of the groups analyzed in terms of population, housing, and uses. The conclusions emphasize the importance of establishing the urban image, relying on citizen rooting, avoiding the privatization of public space, and focusing on sustainable tourism.

Keywords: sustainability, urban heritage, public space, tourism

I. INTRODUCTION

The historical ensemble, as the first urban settlement of the territory, houses at its heart the different cultures and typologies of the original city, with intrinsic characteristics that have been lost over time as the city has grown. The typology of the Mediterranean city has evolved, over recent decades, into an urban model that is completely different from pre-existing ones. The original model of a compact and multifunctional city has been replaced by a model of a dispersed and fragmented city, subdivided by functions and undesirable zoning that blurs the public character linked to the social encounters that used to take place in central urban areas (Borja, 2012; García-Doménech, 2017a).

The tangible and intangible cultural heritage is a relevant factor in the humanization of cities. Through urban and territorial policies, with the right investments, infrastructure, and cultural sites, as well as intangible heritage, can be safeguarded and fostered, highlighting the role these play in the rehabilitation and revitalization of urban areas, and the strengthening of social participation and the exercise of citizenship (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development [UNCED], 2016; Maraña and Revert, 2020). Cities have lost their centrality and, with it, their sphere of socialization. Mediterranean cities, characterized by their compactness and functional mix, fostered social relations through interaction in their public spaces. In this urban model, where diversity prevails, where residential use is combined with administrative, commercial, cultural, and leisure uses, spaces of social relationship were naturally generated. However, their dispersion has led to the loss of this plurality, causing negative effects on socialization in central urban areas and the resulting loss of rootedness in the central urban space (Mehta, 2019; Maraña and Revert, 2020). Specifically, the historical hubs are spaces originally intended for habitat, which generate strong links with the population and the environment. Faced with this context, this research seeks to explore potential tensions between habitat and heritage and examine how tourism can influence the authenticity of the environment. To this end, an analysis of the historical city is carried out using urban sustainability parameters, without forgetting the material and immaterial historical heritage, understanding that this is a part of the territory destined to be inhabited. It is intended, in this sense, to find follow-up directives for the right conservation of the environment, determining the variables that have been altered and the possible corrective actions to be used to maintain urban management based on sustainability criteria (Noca, 2017).

The analysis is made in two Mediterranean municipalities, Altea and La Vila Joiosa (or Villajoyosa), towns of Alicante, a province located in the Spanish Mediterranean arc.

These cities are relevant for their national and European tourist activity. They are medium-sized and share similar physical and functional characteristics. The historical hubs of these two cities present urban problems, common in the needs of improving the livability, functionality, mobility, and urban services (Roldán, 2021), whose solution could be found in both the material and social regeneration (Bohigas, 2004; Aledo, Mazón, and Mantecón, 2007; Rubio and Ponce, 2012; Fariña Tojo, 2018; M. Troitiño and L. Troitiño, 2018; Jimeno, Aledo, and Ortuño, 2018; Mehta, 2019; Rengifo, Campesino, Sánchez, Salcedo, and Martín, 2020).

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Functional proportionality and urban indicators

Cities are made up of fragments with their own identity, where their inhabitants or neighbors have a sense of spatial belonging: their neighborhoods. Glick (1992) considers the neighborhood as a residential sector with a clear identity and geographical boundaries, which can acquire a social organization recognized by the municipality. From that perspective, it is about recovering the structured city from this minimum organizational unit. According to Jordi Borja (2012), neighborhoods are the representation of a certain community, collective consciousness, and the cultural identity of a given settlement. Thus, the concept of neighborhood is more social than an urban issue. The territory is felt as one's own, a symbolic form of ownership, of belonging to a certain place (García-Doménech, 2021). Hence, the term *topophilia*, or love for the territory, emerges in small areas such as neighborhoods, places that evoke a feeling of affection, places that concentrate people's existence, the basis on which the sense of possession and identity towards a space is based (García-Doménech, 2017b).

Currently, historical downtowns present a series of common problems to be solved: deterioration of the buildings, precarious living conditions, loss of functional vitality, migrating and aging population, underuse of residential space, urban mobility and parking difficulties, precarious urban services, etc. (Roldán, 2021). In this framework, sustainability must overcome the concepts of preservation and material conservation (García-Doménech, 2017a). It is no longer a question of preserving what once was, but of giving meaning to its "projection into the future without ignoring its historical anchorage" (Carrión, 2003, p. 9). Protection and recovery policies must include instruments capable of regulating the "tension between static physical realities and changing socio-economic realities" (Troitiño, 2003, p. 131).

For Bohigas (2004), rehabilitation means rediscovering the balance between social life and physical structure. He also sees the need of reconstructing the city through social regeneration, which in many cases entails the reconfiguration of downtrodden areas. On the other hand, for Rubio and Ponce (2012), in the case of repopulating abandoned urban environments, the social involvement of its new members is essential to constitute a city. According to Mehta (2019), the socialization of a given space is a dialectical process that requires both human relationships and the integration of the different groups that converge there. A historic hub is not a mere outdoor exhibition, but a portion of the city, and, as such, it must function, even from the economic point of view. Precisely, in the historical centers of Mediterranean cities, tourism is usually the driver of any intervention, even running the risk that urban heritage ends up being commodified (Prats, 2006; M. Troitiño and L. Troitiño, 2018; Jimeno *et al.*, 2018; Orozco, 2020; Rengifo *et al.*, 2020). According to Andrés (2005), historical heritage protection policies must include both the physical and the social fabric, with participation in urban planning actions being essential to avoid discrepancies between social needs and the imposed norm. The viability of the compact Mediterranean city model depends on achieving enough attractiveness for the original population that allows for establishing a complex system of socio-economic relations that make it sustainable. Tourism may have a relevant role, but its overuse displaces others, reducing the sustainability of the model based on the existence of a stable enough population (Fariña Tojo, 2018).

There are many publications related to urban indicators. Most of those published in recent decades focus on sustainability. In Agenda 21 (UNCED, 1992) and the United Nations Blue Book (United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development [UNCSD], 1996), there is a vast selection of indicators related to sustainable development. The scope of this type of literature and its variables can be overwhelming. For example, Kuik and Gilbert (1999) subdivide sustainability indicators into three large groups: aggregate, socio-economic-environmental, and free indicators. ICOMOS (1999) promoted a system of indicators for the conservation of world heritage cities. Hugony and Roca (2008) prepared a proposal with brief and clear premises referring to historical ensembles. In 2002, the urban planning section of the Juan de Herrera Institute of the Technical School of Architecture of Madrid made a report on the local sustainability indicators used by several Spanish municipalities. In total, 1,273 indicators classified into four fully defined thematic areas were obtained: economic, environmental, social, and urban planning (Hernández, 2009). Among other works, it is also worth highlighting the analysis of Villacañas (2017), where other indicators are proposed to form a more sustainable city model.

III. CASE STUDY

The study focuses on the analysis of two historical ensembles declared as Assets of Cultural Interest (BIC, in Spanish), an administrative mechanism for heritage protection established by the Spanish regulatory system. These ensembles are located in two touristic municipalities of the Mediterranean, Altea and La Vila Joiosa, part of the Marina Baja region in the province of Alicante, Spain (Figures 1 and 2).

This region was chosen because it is one of the most important tourist areas of the European Mediterranean axis and one of the favorite enclaves of Spanish and also European residential tourism. Both Altea and La Vila Joiosa are medium-sized cities with similar physical and functional characteristics. These are coastal cities with high tourist demand, close to the tourist municipality of greater affluence, Benidorm, which gives them a high potential for population attraction, both permanent and seasonal.

Altea has an area of 34.43 km² and a population of 23,780 inhabitants divided between its urban downtown and low-density suburbs spread throughout the municipality. La Vila Joiosa has an area of 38.50 km² and a population of 33,797 inhabitants concentrated mainly in its urban heart. In both cases, productive activities such as fishing, agriculture, or industry have been relegated by the tourism driver, generated to a large extent by the influx of Benidorm. The economy of this area is closely linked to the tourism industry, which has led to an unprecedented territorial occupation in recent decades. Between 1987 and 2011, the artificial surface of the coastline of the province of Alicante doubled, recording 103% growth and creating new urban areas along the coast. Hence, the population growth has been significant, with a density of 330.7 inhabitants/km².

The comparative analysis between the two urban environments has been made from the point of view of use, not from their physical characteristics. In the case of La Vila Joiosa, the area declared as a BIC, apart from having about 60% more buildings than Altea, has two natural spaces with an important surface area within its makeup, occupying all the free spaces: some 13.55 ha of the 18.16 ha of all the protected environment. However, in the case of Altea, the total protected area is 3.52 ha, of which 1.83 ha has been built on. The original urban layout has been respected, even though some original plots have been affected without modifying the occupied area. The predominant uses today are residential, religious, tertiary, and tourist. Both ensembles are located on a promontory which gives them a landscape value added to their inherent one (Figure 3).



Figure 1. Aerial images of the historical ensembles of Altea and La Vila Joiosa. Source: Town Halls of Altea and La Vila Joiosa.



Figure 2. Orthophoto with CIR image - municipalities of Altea and Villajoyosa. Source: National Geographic Institute (Spain).

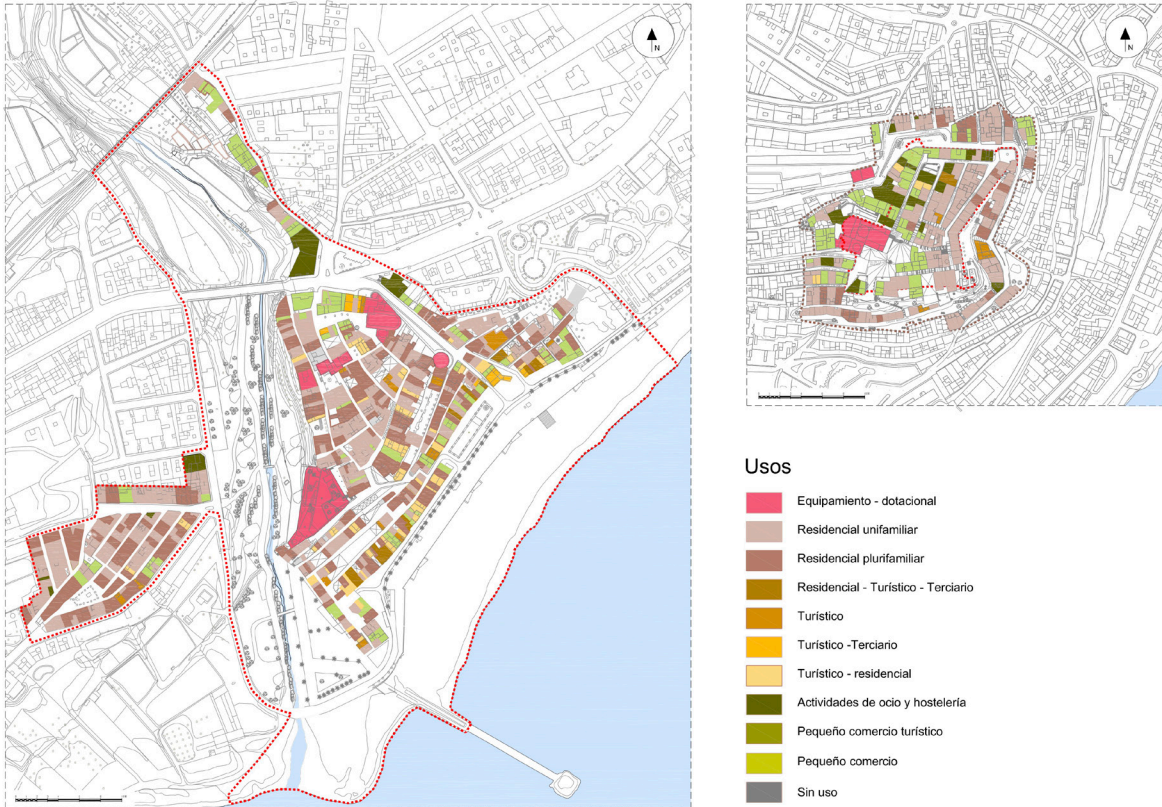


Figure 3. Plans of the protected historical ensembles of Altea and La Vila Joiosa, that reflect the current uses of buildings. Source: Preparation by the authors.

IV. METHODOLOGY

A method based on a system of indicators to evaluate historical centers has been considered as the one that can offer a series of objectives to improve municipal areas and contribute to the conception of the city as a sustainable entity. In each of the study areas, this will be able to determine whether there really is physical proximity between the facilities and housing, if there are diverse types of housing for different social groups, if the public space is accessible, if there are attractive elements in the area to act as a claim, and if the basic needs of housing, work, education, culture, business, entertainment, etc., are met. The criterion is based on the four aspects that define the sustainable city model established by the Ministry of Public Works in Spain (Figure 4), which are detailed below.

Aspect 1. Compactness. In this concept, aspects such as building density, the distribution of uses, mobility, and public space, can be seen, distinguishing between green



Figure 4. Table with the four aspects that define a more sustainable city model. Source- System of indicators and conditions for large and medium-sized cities. Ministry of Public Works of Spain (2010).

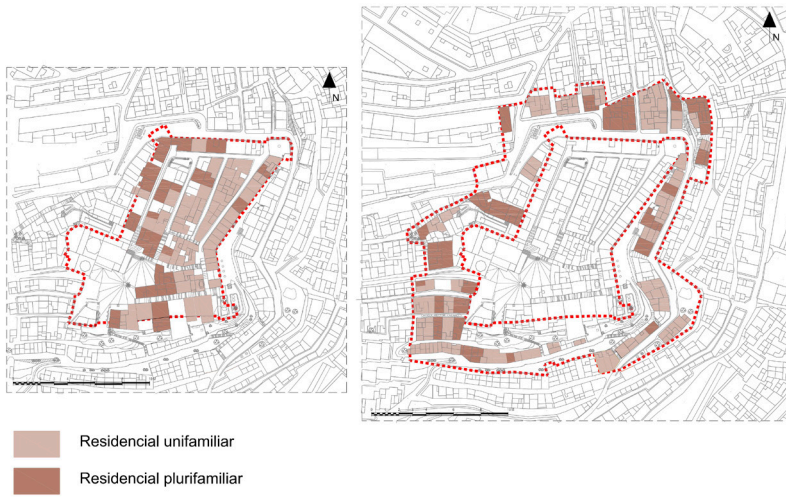


Figure 5. Plan of properties for single-family or multi-family residential use in the protected area of the historical ensemble of Altea. Source: Preparation by the authors.

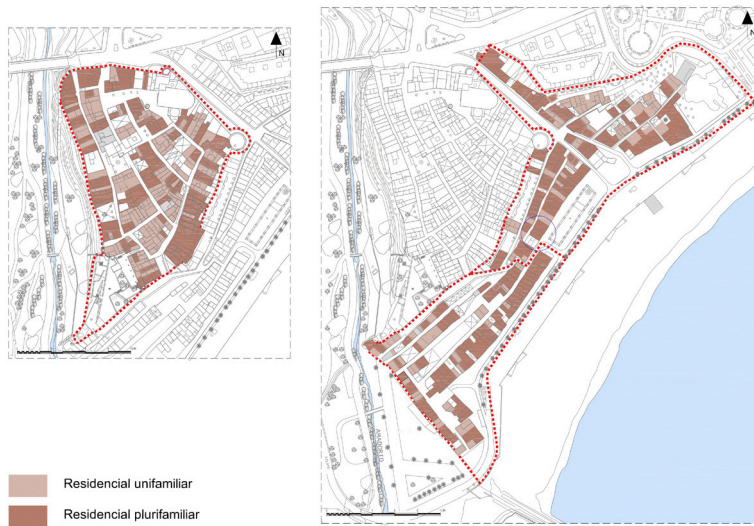


Figure 6. Plan with the single-family or multi-family residential use properties in the protected area of the historical ensemble of La Vila Joiosa. Source: Preparation by the authors.

areas, facilities, and roads. This last element is particularly significant as it shows the reality of the social life and the relationship that this engages with the place analyzed.

Aspect 2. Complexity. This refers to the urban interaction among the different entities involved in the daily work of the city, and the functional relationship between the different economic activities, associations, facilities, and institutions located in the same area.

Aspect 3. Efficiency. The aim here is to verify whether the urban space studied is adapted to a policy of resource management and energy self-sufficiency, observing the degree of efficiency it has when the analysis is made.

Aspect 4. Urban heritage cohesion. This aspect addresses personal relationships in an urban system with heritage value, the type of people who live in the area, since the social diversity of the space favors the interaction and

Population census in the area	Altea	La vila joiosa
Spanish nationals	174	883
Foreigners	93	195
From the European Union	74	167
From non-EU countries	19	28
Total resident population	267	1,078

Table 1. Population data in each of the historical ensembles, 2018. Source: Preparation by the authors, using municipal records.



Figure 7. Plan of tertiary use in the protected area of the historical ensemble of Altea. Image of one of the streets of the area with the occupation of the public space by the hotel activity. Source: Preparation by the authors.

relationships among individuals. In this way, an attempt is made to avoid possible social segregation.

V. RESULTS

The typical use of the areas under study is residential, although other uses are allowed as long as they are compatible with the traditional architectures of the area. The predominant typology in the case of Altea is the single-family residential one (Figure 5), which has not impeded tertiary uses, since in most cases people have opted to change the use of the entire building.

In the case of La Vila Joiosa, the use of single-family and multi-family typologies is evenly balanced, with a total of 319 multi-family and 299 single-family residential buildings (Figure 6).

The lack of social housing in both ensembles is particularly striking, although this could be a possible solution for the development of vacant lots. However, placing tourist apartments is more profitable. As for the census population in each ensemble, the proportion of residents in the case of La Vila Joiosa is higher than in the case of Altea (Table 1). This is mainly due to two reasons: in La Vila Joiosa, its area is larger and the predominance of single-family residential properties is more moderate (Table 2). In addition, another relevant fact in this sense is that many of the single-family buildings of the BIC in Altea have changed from residential to tertiary use.

There is a high foreign population censored in both ensembles, with a relevant population from Northern Europe. This data confirms the ongoing demand from the foreign population in this type of area for a second home. However, the results demonstrate diversity in the nationality of seasonal and temporary residents, thus

Real estate	Altea	La vila joiosa
Facilities	2	4
Buildings for exclusive residential use	138	455
multifamily	17	202
single-family	121	253
Buildings for residential and tertiary use	34	81
Buildings for exclusive tertiary use	19	6
Buildings for exclusive tourist use	5	13
Buildings for tourist and residential use	3	49
Buildings for tourist and tertiary use	0	7
Buildings for residential, tourist, and tertiary use	1	10
Unused municipal buildings	0	5
Total N° of vacant lots	3	40
Total buildings	202	630

Table 2. Uses of the constructions of the built urban sector in each of the historical ensembles, 2018. Source: Prepared by the authors.

Real estate	Altea	La vila joiosa
Total number of dwellings	215	1,188
Total number of tourist homes	12	141
Total number of commercial premises	45	106
with use	35	49
unused	10	57
Total real estate	272	1,429

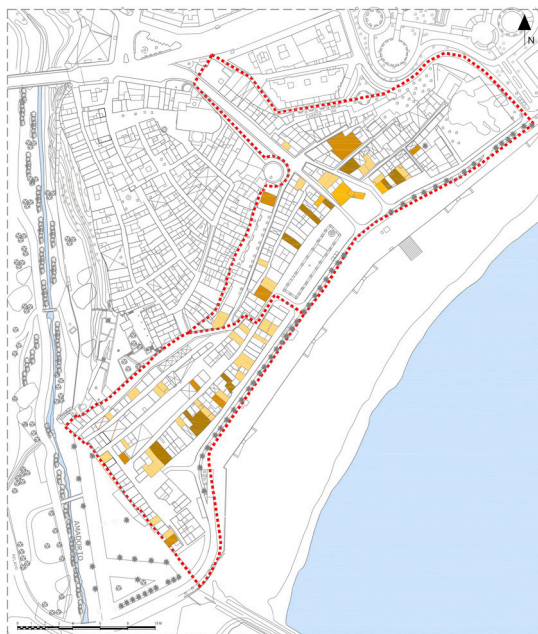
Table 3. Total of properties of the built urban sector in each of the historical ensembles, 2018. Source: Preparation by the authors.

favoring the sociocultural heterogeneity of the space. Regarding the use, in both cases, the main tertiary activities are focused on leisure, hospitality, and small tourist trade. In Altea, there are no activities related to the needs of residential use in the analyzed area. Due to the construction typology, and to expand the hotel offer, restaurants have turned the public space into one more part of the establishment (Figure 7), making it difficult for residents to have access to supplies, thereby reducing their daily actions.

In La Vila Joiosa, activities related to leisure and tourism are mainly found in the areas with the greatest tourist influx, the coastal front, and the area next to the church square. The number of empty stores is striking. Many housed the supply of basic needs and local commerce activities. The cause points to a lack of demand for this type of

product in the area, either because of the ease of finding daily products in shopping centers near the study area or because there is not enough resident population to contribute to keeping these services. The proliferation of uses other than residential is evident: in the case of Altea, 19 properties are for exclusively tertiary use, and in La Vila Joiosa, there are 13 properties for this (Table 2), not counting those that share uses. This eventuality is certainly a reflection of what is happening in both ensembles.

The proliferation of tourist housing is constant. The vast majority of these properties are acquired as second homes, but are temporarily transformed into tourist apartments during periods when the owners do not use them and rent them out to get a return on their investment. According to the applicable regulations, tourist housing is understood as a "complete real estate,



Interrelación de las viviendas turísticas y otros usos

Residencial - Turístico - Terciario
 Turístico
 Turístico - Terciario
 Turístico - residencial



Figure 8. Location map of tourist homes in the protected coastal area of La Vila Joiosa. Typical property that houses tourist homes. Source: Preparation by the authors

regardless of its type that, having the municipal urban compatibility report allows such use, is transferred by price and habitually, for tourist, vacation, or leisure purposes” (Consell de la Comunitat Valenciana, 2021, art. 41.1). The aforementioned regulations exclude the projection, promotion, construction, and sale of second homes. Hence, it is possible to state that there is a series of properties with occasional tourist use that, originally, are second homes (Table 3).

As in other resort towns, there is an increasing demand for this type of accommodation. As can be seen, a total of 141 tourist homes are offered in La Vila Joiosa, spread around the different areas in the ensemble, but mainly located in the area of greatest visual appeal, on the coastal facade (Figure 8). Tourism can contribute to maintaining the attractiveness of the historic hubs as, in part, the neighborhood of Altea has achieved. In this way, tourism can be considered as an agent for the *branding* of the place, to which Fariña Tojo (2018) refers.

From the results obtained, it should be noted that La Vila Joiosa is experiencing strong demand for tourist housing in the area. There are 141 tourist homes registered. On the

contrary, regarding the tertiary sector, of the 106 existing premises, only 49 are in use, most of them related to leisure and hospitality. In the case of Altea, the presence of tourist housing is lower. However, 35 out of the 45 total commercial premises in the area are in use, and as in the previous case, most of them are associated with leisure and hospitality.

VI. DISCUSSION

Since the 1980s, the coastal countries of the Mediterranean have been appealing to the European population, but the coastal areas of Mediterranean Europe are considered among the most fragile on the planet, overloaded by the increasing anthropic pressure of urbanization due to the constant temporary reception caused by tourism (Giussani, Luengo, and Poujol, 2010). Tourism not only generates economic benefits, but it also influences, and not in a completely positive way, other aspects such as the transformation of the territory and the overburdening of existing resources (M. Troitiño and L. Troitiño, 2018; Jimeno *et al.*, 2018; Rengifo *et al.*, 2020). Originally, this activity was aimed at bringing benefits

to the host community and providing important means and motivations to care for and keep their heritage and traditions alive (ICOMOS, 1999).

Nowadays, historical sites such as those addressed here can constitute an important driver not just for tourism activity, but also for the integral and sustainable development of the territory. However, it is essential to find a breaking point between landscape and habitat, respecting the well-being of the inhabitants and the construction of their feeling of belonging. These historical ensembles run the risk of becoming urban spaces in crisis. They are occupied by new uprooted settlers who must be an active part of the proposals of the new recovery plans (Rubio and Ponce, 2012). The sense of identity was based on the attachment to that place from childhood, where generation after generation experiences and life events had been shared (García-Doménech, 2021). Such places, both geographical and historical, where social interactions take place, have defined the spatial crystallization of a cultural environment (Mehta, 2019). Thus, in these areas, the heritage character remains unchanged, but its authenticity has been altered (Fernández and Silva, 2016; Orozco, 2020).

Heritage is not something natural or eternal, but rather a social construction. Indeed, in the analyzed historical hubs, heritage is presented as an image of identity, not as the identity itself. However, the heritage of these environments can fluctuate between a true representation of identity and a simple tourist commodification: "the populations subjected to the commodification of heritage do not raise questions about identity, but rather economic ones" (Prats, 2006, p. 72). A territory must be able to reinvent itself, energizing its potential and creating innovations to improve the quality of life of its inhabitants. The fundamental principle for this is found in the social capacities present in that territory, and the aspects analyzed represent an opportunity in that sense. To achieve positive results in competitiveness, sustainability, and improvement of well-being, the inhabitants of these historic hubs must be involved (García-Doménech, 2017a; García-Doménech, 2017b).

VII. CONCLUSIONS

In the double case studied, the research began by focusing on heritage settlements originating from pre-industrial times, with compact urban plots and with much of their subdivision, original layout, and original real estate remaining intact. However, from the point of view of efficiency, the general tone of the two spaces is given by the deficit and obsolescence of urban services. The rigidity of the heritage fabric is one of the existing incompatibilities with the new supply systems. The connection with the rest of the municipality is limited and its oppressed physical form limits the possibilities for expansion.

The correct perception of the urban image is one of the most important aspects to take into account for the survival of these environments. The conservation of the sites is closely linked to the vision one has of them. In this sense, everything that is perceived is located in the public space. The profile of public prominence must be maintained, where possible, just as it originated. But if there is a desire for these places to continue to be inhabited, a minimum number of services related to the residents and their needs must also be guaranteed.

Citizens play a fundamental role. Most of the interventions made to recover these historical spaces have made a change in the social structure from the original one. But the sense of identity and belonging that the original settlers had has not been able to be perpetuated with the new residents. The conservation efforts of these two places have been limited to the physical plane, largely overlooking the functional needs that make their sustainability possible. The material is being preserved, but not the residential. In this context, the active participation of the resident is key to recovering the essence of these urban areas.

From the results obtained, one of the drawbacks that the resident encounters is the privatization of public space. This is evidently a coexistence of uses, and it is turning into zoning by uses. The growing demand for tourist housing increases the number of tertiary activities related to this sector. There is a certain international consensus on the search for a new global framework that encourages the future development of cultural heritage around sustainability criteria. Everything aims at eliminating the idea of the historic hub as one of purely patrimonial value. In this way, historical sites could be presented as the main spaces where to apply current sustainability policies, looking for alternatives to merely holiday tourism. Sustainable tourism promotes more responsible use of resources and a greater awareness of heritage conservation, both for the local population and for tourists. The promotion of social housing for young people on a rental basis with a commitment to residential stability to guarantee their roots could contribute to sustainability. In short, this research reaffirms the need to maintain and strengthen the identity of the historical hubs and, consequently, to stop seeing them as a simple tourist resource to rediscover their neighborhood essence.

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