



## City profile

## Seville: A city with two souls



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## ABSTRACT

Seville is a city of 700,000 inhabitants in the south of Spain. It is currently the administrative capital of the region of Andalusia. However, Seville was once the most important city in the Spanish Empire, and a global metropolis when it monopolized trade with 'the Indies'. Its historical past, its subsequent decline and its traditions (many of them religious) generate a range of perceptions among local society as to what the city should be. After being transformed in the wake of the two World Expositions that were staged in the city in the 20th century, at the beginning of the 21st century a change was proposed to Seville's planning model that would not clash with its past. This profile seeks to analyze this period and interpret whether these changes and transformations to the city are part of a consciously created city model and to consider any inconsistencies and internal contradictions. The conclusions show that in periods of large-scale change in the city, the starting-point has to be an agreed city model that enables tradition and modernity to exist side by side, and that is based on greater public participation. The city profile of Seville is significant and useful as an exemplary case of a historic city being capable of renewing the relationship between urban space and the citizen.

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## Introduction

The city of Seville has had a major presence throughout history from the time of the first Mediterranean civilizations, through its Roman and Moorish past, and culminating in its emergence as the hub of Spain's monopoly over 'the Indies' after the discovery of America. The cultural vestiges and historical remains of the time can still be seen, some acknowledged by UNESCO as a World Heritage site. Its historical past, its subsequent decline, and its adherence to its traditions and customs have created two perceptions of the city, and the search for summary solutions defines a large part of urban discussion in Seville.

This clash between tradition and modernity has become more evident with the changes to urban development in the city since the last part of the 20th century. A period of crisis followed the holding of the 1992 Universal Exposition in the city, and at the beginning of the 21st century Seville sought a new endogenous planning model that was more balanced and sustainable. This process was the perfect scenario for the dialectic battle to be played out between the two souls of the city.

This *City Profile* does not focus on a detailed study of the fertile history of the city of Seville, but on interpreting the motives,

controversies and circumstances that have accompanied its great transformations, focusing especially on the changes that took place during the first decade of the 21st century. The historical process and the contemporary urban dynamics of Seville and its urban region may serve as a road-map for finding ways to bring city functions up to date and face up to the new social, economic and political challenges that the current deep crisis presents.

To this end, the article is structured in three sections. The first offers a brief description of the history of the city, from the first pre-Roman settlements to the beginnings of democratic era when Franco's death brought an end to the dictatorship. The following section discusses changes to the city arising from the staging of the 1992 Universal Exposition and its subsequent stagnation. Finally, the last section is devoted to recent changes during the first years of the 21st century, emphasizing the commitment to a more sustainable and diversified city. The final conclusions provide an analysis of the main general lessons that can be learned for urban planning in historical cities from this case study, and of local society's reaction to the sweeping changes that the city has experienced in recent decades.

## The city and its history

For at least the last two thousand years Seville has existed at the center of the Guadalquivir river valley (see Fig. 1), at the very point to which the effects of the tides are felt and the river is navigable.

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The Mediterranean's first seafaring cultures – Phoenicians, Greeks, and Carthaginians – had intense contact with the first settlers of the land. Later, from the 2nd century BC, the whole area, known as *Baetica*, became one of the most Romanized areas of the Mediterranean, so much so that the first Emperor of Rome who was not from the Italian peninsula, Trajan, as well as the family of his successor, Hadrian, came from the town of Italica, 5 km outside Seville. This vibrant past left huge marks on the city that, today, lie beneath it. Archeological remains that have been found show a city-port with a very active economy and a good level of infrastructure and public buildings that, without doubt, would have played a major role in the exchange of the Mediterranean triad of goods (wheat-wine-oil) from the interior of Roman Hispania to the Mediterranean through the city's port. Seville's importance enabled it to carry on being a major center of population after the collapse of Roman civilization. The presence and role of its Bishop, Isidore of Seville (6th cent.) turned the city into a major seat of culture during the higher medieval period (Fontaine, 1988).

The conquest and Islamic period (7th–13th cent.) resulted in sweeping changes to the city's urban structure. Islamic Seville's period of greatest splendor came with the land becoming an independent kingdom in the 11th century. Seville stood out as the capital of the *Taifa*, the Arab kingdom of the same name in Spain which stretched from the south of Portugal, the Algarve, to the province of Cadiz (Bosch, 1988). A key strategic decision for the future of Seville dates from this time: the expansion of the area contained within the city walls, tripling the size of the city that had existed up to that time. This large urban area enabled the city to grow in the following centuries and enabled it to play a central role during the lower medieval period, after it had been captured by the Kingdom of Castile (1248) and then at the heart of the Spanish Empire (Vincent, 1991). Today, Seville possesses one of the largest and most highly populated historical city centers in Europe, and this without doubt both marks and defines the city. Vestiges of Islamic Seville can be seen in the layout of its streets, the Seville *Alcazar* (fortress-palace) and in its principal monument and the symbol of the city, the *Giralda* (the cathedral bell tower).

After the discovery and conquest of America, Seville became the most important city in the Spanish Empire and a global metropolis

(see Fig. 2) when it monopolized trade with the Indies (Lovell, 2001). During the 16th and 17th centuries, fleets of ships sailed out from its secure inland port towards America and returned laden with gold, silver and all other manner of products (Garcia, 2004). Seville's cultural and artistic life was vibrant, with an example-in-point being that the writer Cervantes began to write his most important work, *Don Quixote*, in one of the city's jails (Canavaggio, 2003). It was also the birthplace of the painter Velazquez and it was here that he spent the first part of his career (Tiffany, 2012). A number of colonies of traders of different nationalities (French, Genoans, Germans) also formed part of Seville's Golden Age urban landscape. It was during this period in history that the last of the most significant items were added to the catalog of Seville's heritage. This included the completion of the cathedral, within whose precincts stands the Arabic minaret, the Giralda (the belfry that tops the tower is a 16th century renaissance addition), and the current General Archive of the Indies, where information about the Spanish colonies was centralized. These last two historical buildings and the Alcazar were recognized as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1987.

In 1717 Seville lost its monopoly on trade with America. The city descended into a long period of decline, while at the same time starting to forge a new personality that would come to be the international archetype of what is 'Andalusian' and 'Spanish', characterized by flamenco music and bullfighting, amongst other things (López, 2008). A good example of this is that Seville became the imaginary scenario for numerous operas (Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and *The Marriage of Figaro*, Verdi's *The Force of Destiny*, Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*, Beethoven's *Fidelio* and Bizet's *Carmen*, among others) and an exotic allusion in romantic literature (Colmeiro, 2002; Sentaurens, 1994).

After this long decline, the city reached the 20th century as a barely industrialized provincial capital, the base of the Andalusian land-owning aristocracy, and clinging to its traditions.

The Ibero-American Exposition of 1929 was held in Seville. Its success was not total due to the lack of visitors and its little international impact, as well as the debts that were incurred (Brajos, Álvarez, & Parias, 1990b; Calvogonzalez, 1989). However, this did contribute to the development of another monumental ensemble



Fig. 1. The location of Seville. Source: National Geographic Society. Adapted by authors.

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