City profile

# City profile: Valencia

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

The historically agrarian and provincial city of Valencia has recently been transformed into a Spanish regional capital, a Mediterranean cultural and economic center, and a major tourism destination. Valencia's engagement with globalization and European integration has unfolded amidst complex regional politics, marked by vigorous debates about cultural difference, political autonomy, and official bilingualism (Castilian Spanish and Valenciano/Catalan). Here we survey the city's two millennia of historical development, explore recent urban changes through five emblematic urban landscapes, and briefly discuss major urban policy and planning challenges facing the city. Valencia is a place of contradiction and juxtaposition, where global mega-events and neighborhood festivals, avant-garde architecture and two-millennia old croplands exist side by side. If these complex dynamics are not unique, they are powerfully exemplified in this Mediterranean city navigating between global modernity and regional tradition.

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## Introduction

Few cities embody the engagement of urban process with globalization and European integration better than the Mediterranean city of Valencia, Spain (Figure 1). Valencia is Spain's third largest city (after Madrid and Barcelona) with a municipal residents within in a metropolitan area of more than 1.5 million, yet has until recently received little outside attention. Once called the "world capital of anti-tourism" by British critic Kenneth Tynan, this traditionally agrarian and provincial city has become capital of the Spanish autonomous region the *Comunitat Valenciana*, Mediterranean cultural and economic center and major destination for foreign visitors. Indeed, the University of Valencia is now the second largest destination for European exchange students. This metamorphosis is seen in the city's changing landscape, embodied in the monumental cultural-entertainment complex *La Ciutat de les Arts i de les Ciències* (City of the Arts and Sciences, in the regional language Valenciano/Catalan[2]), a new conference center, the growing container port, gentrification and immigration in the city center, and the newly renovated "America's Cup" port (host to the 32nd America's Cup sailing race in 2007 and Formula 1 racing's "European

Grand Prix" in 2008). These changes are only the most visible emblems of the forces transforming local spaces and identities, and loci for resistance to these forces.

This article traces Valencia's historical development in context of its unique physical setting, the complexities of regional life and politics, and a changing political–economic backdrop. We briefly summarize the city's origins as Mediterranean agricultural and trading center, rooted deeply in the irrigated *L'Horta de València* (Valencian croplands), and then discuss the city's recent reorientation towards the Mediterranean and Europe. We explore this transformation through five urban districts embodying – in their planning, urbanization, and contestation – multi-faceted forces of change (Figure 2). Quintessential European tensions between the traditional and modern, local and global are evident in these Valencian landscapes. Agrarian iconography remains important in Valencia: the paella, citrus, the modest farm dwelling *la barraca*, the weekly meetings of irrigators in the *Tribunal de les Aïgues* (Water Tribunal), and the silken regional costumes and customs of the famed festival *les Falles*. These have defined Valencia to locals (Fuster, 1962; Piqueras Infante, 1996) and foreigners (Company, 2007). But the city is increasingly identified by a different set of symbols: an upward-rising skyline dominated by the work of Santiago Calatrava, crowds of sun-tanned tourists at the redeveloped port, expanding traffic by discount airlines, and gantry cranes unloading container ships. With this duality come new social and environmental tensions, highlighted in Valencia by a sense of regional – indeed national – difference framed for many by a bilingual history, in which Valenciano/Catalan is co-official with Castilian Spanish. Maintaining Valencia's distinctiveness in the face

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[2] The *Comunitat Valenciana* is officially bi-lingual in Castilian Spanish and Valenciano/Catalan. Local place names and terms will be cited in the autochthonous Valenciano/Catalan. Castilian Spanish terms, when used, are indicated (for example (Sp: New Valencia)
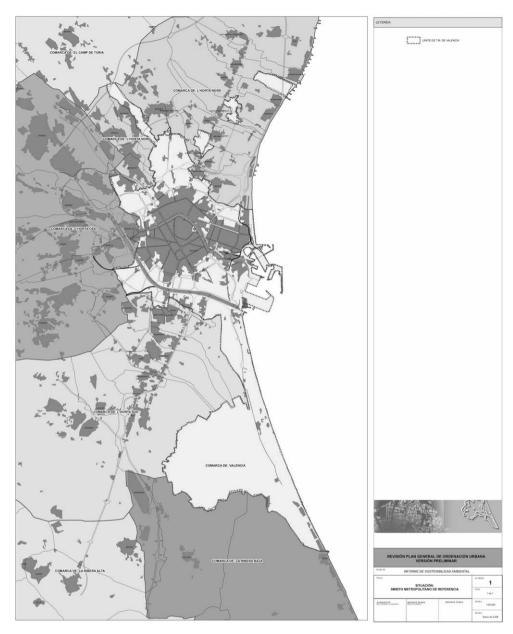
**Figure 1.** The City of Valencia and its surrounding metropolitan area. Urbanized areas are in dark gray. Map reproduced courtesy of the Ajuntament de Valencia.

of rapid economic, social, and urban change is an increasing challenge. And the landscape serves as material and symbolic referent for struggles to define the city and region's future.

Below we offer a brief primer on Valencia and the complex and contradictory forces necessary to understand the city's historical and urban development, and the cultural landscapes through which Valencians are constructing a new Mediterranean city.

## Two millennia of urban development

### Origins of an Agrarian, Mediterranean "Paradise"

Valencia is a Mediterranean city situated on a broad coastal plain between the crescent-shaped Gulf of Valencia and a rugged mountainous interior. Although the city's climate is semi-arid, snowmelt from distant mountains provides the source for local rivers like the River Turia. The physical geography of the surrounding environment is divided between fingers of higher elevation lands

featuring pine forests and scrub (known locally as *el secà*, or dry lands), low lying plains and wetlands near the mouth of the Turia, and coastal areas of dunes and pine scrub (Costa, 1994).

In 138 BC Romans first settled *Valentia* on a small island on the River Turia, inland from the Mediterranean. The absence of both a natural harbor and highlands for defensive fortification were offset by a mild climate, deep and readily irrigated alluvial soils, and access to transportation routes. Evidence of Roman settlement can still be seen in the excavated remains of the Roman forum and baths under the *Plaça de l'Almoina* (Almoina Plaza) and remnants of early irrigation canals under the *Plaça del Tossal* (Tossal Plaza) (Ribera and Jiménez Salvador, 2000). Even as the Roman Empire declined, and a new period dawned with the Visigothic invasions of 584 AD, the task of forging a city and its agricultural hinterland continued to occupy Valencia's inhabitants (Sanchis Guarner, 1972).

Muslims conquered the city in 718 AD. They walled the city and watered it and surrounding areas by constructing an elaborate sys-