



Golf courses and land use patterns in the south-east of Spain



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ABSTRACT

A large number of golf course projects were planned in the southeast of Spain from the late 1990s to 2010. Many of these projects, which multiplied the existing sports offer, were accompanied by residential developments composed of thousands of dwelling units, unlike the existing golf courses which were surrounded by open natural spaces. The aim of this article is to analyse the factors that have led to the spectacular expansion of golf course-residential developments in the southeast of Spain. The results show that these developments were motivated by the desire to make huge short term profits. The developments were, in turn, favored by the expansion of low-cost airlines, which has facilitated mobility for people who were from central and northern Europe and were interested in buying real estate properties in these regions, and by the decrease in profitability of the horticultural crops that were dominant in the region, which has facilitated the sale of the agricultural land.

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1. Introduction

Since the late 1990s and especially since the early twenty first century numerous studies have warned about the repercussions that the expansion of low-density residential developments areas may have on the European territory (EEA, 2006). This increase in urban-residential developments has often taken place in coastal areas, as it happened in Ireland, Portugal and, above all, in the Spanish Mediterranean coast (Gaja, 2008; Romero et al., 2012). In fact, a report issued by the European Environment Agency in 2009 predicted that the urbanized area of the Spanish Mediterranean coast would increase between 55% and 73% from 1995 to 2025 (EEA, 2009). Between 2001 and 2011, the total number of homes in Spain increased by almost five million, or approximately 25% (Ministerio de Fomento, 2012), as the housing stock rose from 21.03 to 26.01 million homes respectively. This intense urban development was heavily concentrated in territorial terms. 2487262 of the new homes approved during the period 2000–2011, or 43.88% of the total for Spain as a whole, were built in the eleven provinces on the Mediterranean coast (Hernández et al., 2015).

The significance of this phenomenon can be understood in terms of a combination of several factors (socioeconomic, cultural, mobility systems and urban planning regulations). The municipalities' policy for obtaining revenue based on building permits, and plan-

ning reviews aimed at creating land designated for building, placed the regional governments in a very advantageous position, and led to unlimited urban expansion in which speculation was another characteristic of this real estate bubble (Romero et al., 2012). The promotion of infrastructures and the improvement of transport links fostered by the European Union's Cohesion Funds and Structural Funds also played a role. Shorter journey times and lower costs between primary residences and holiday homes, between Spain's Mediterranean coast and the rest of Europe, and even from the interior of Spain to the coast led to increased mobility. The residential expansion that took place on Spain's Mediterranean coast between the late 1990s and 2008 had a number of significant territorial effects, which are readily apparent as changes in land use and changes in the landscape.

A distinctive feature of these low-density residential developments composed of single-family houses is the fact that they are accompanied by golf courses to offer the traditional "sun and sea" tourism experience (Priestley, 2006; Rico et al., 2009) and to fulfill the need for water amenities such as swimming pools, golf courses, aquatic and amusement parks, gardens, spas, sports and leisure facilities to renew and restructure a tourist industry classified as mature (Gössling and Hall, 2006; Vera and Rodríguez, 2012). Developers' interest in golf course developments is aroused by the important purchasing power of the market segment interested in using this type of facilities and the multiplying effects that they generate. However, it is the so-called "golf urbanization" (Vera, 1991) which has registered the highest boom in recent years, not only in the coastal municipalities, but also in inland areas. The golf course will be, as it happened with the marinas, the means to continue with

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the real estate business by adding value to the new buildings. The provinces of Alicante and Murcia (southeast of Spain) are the areas where these developments are taking place with greater intensity. This is clearly reflected in the increased number of golf courses: in 2006 there were only 23 golf courses but there were 120 planned golf courses with capacity to accommodate about 500,000 homes and hardly hotels over an area with a total resident population of around three million people (INE, 2012).

The association of residential developments to golf courses, understood as a process that increases the final value of the dwelling unit, is not unique of the Spanish Mediterranean coast like Costa del Sol (Province of Málaga), where several studies have detected a similar dynamic (Grindlay et al., 2011; Priego et al., 2006). And it has actually been repeatedly observed in other territories with wide implementation of golf courses. In the United States, the development of golf course communities began in earnest in the 1950s and has steadily grown in popularity ever since. During the 1980s, almost 35% of the new golf facilities included some real component and at the beginning of the twenty first century, about 46% of golf course construction was real estate related (Mulvihill, 2001), so that people with the highest economic rents correspond to homeowners with golf course views, unlike people who have low incomes (Robbins, 2007).

This strategy (increasing the value of property) has been documented and corroborated by several studies from a quantitative point of view. For example, the premium paid for properties adjoining a golf course in San Diego (California) was between 4.81% (Do and Grudnitski, 1995; Do and Grudnitski, 1997) and 7.6% (Lutzenhiser, 2001). This premium soared to 26% in relation to the average sales price of all homes not located next to golf course at Pebble Creek, Texas (Nicholls and Crompton, 2007). Anderson and West (2006) conducted a study in St. Paul and Minneapolis (Minnesota, USA) and determined that the price increases 0.0060% for each 1% that the distance to the golf course decreases. In a study about golf courses carried out in 2001 in Portland, Oregon, Lutzenhiser came to the conclusion that the highest price of housing is reached with distances of less than 200 feet, and that the existence of a golf course is irrelevant from 1500 feet onwards.

Also relevant to determine the increase in the added value of housing is the analysis of the urban typology associated with golf course. Real estate developments tend to be low-rise housing instead of high-rise building based on the preferences of the majority of buyers. According to some surveys, 43% of the owners are retired and 60% of buyers are British and central Europeans and more than 70% of all residents showed a high acceptance of the housing design. In this sense, for 50% of the owners the existence of a golf course has been the determining factor to buy a house. In addition, low-rise housing involves low initial investment and immediate benefits from their sale and is much less of an entrepreneurial risk because any number of such homes can be built at one time. Thus, low-rise housing is adjustable to temporary market realities (Gerda, 2006; Graves and Cornish, 1998).

The diffusion of urban-residential uses coincides with areas that registered changes in the agricultural ones from the 60s. The existence of land suitable for farming, climate factors (fair winter weather) and mobilized water from rivers and aquifers in the coastal flat lands and valleys of the warmest Mediterranean area in Spain, where the province of Alicante and the Region of Murcia are located, have allowed the transformation of dry and forest lands into irrigated land for the cultivation of vegetables and fruits for export (Rico, 2006). The substitution of extensive farming by intensive farming has not been unique to this area, and has also occurred in the coasts of the south of Italy, Greece and Cyprus (EEA, 2006). Tensions and conflicts between urban-residential and agricultural uses have increased as a result of the remarkable expansion in the mid twentieth century of the residential uses (Gössling et al., 2012),

in which the development of golf courses associated with residential complexes has been very intense. During the last few decades, in the south of Alicante the industrial, leisure and residential uses have taken over much of the irrigable land. Thus, the construction of large housing developments on elevated plots of land with good landscape views has been very common. In fact, in several municipalities the loss of irrigable land for these reasons exceeded 50% from 1985 to 2000 (Rico and Hernández, 2008; Ruiz and Melián, 2006).

Changes in land uses that have occurred since the mid twentieth century (increase of irrigated land and creation and widespread of urban-residential and tourist uses) have increased the pressure on the available resources. The relation between water demands and available resources are a controversial subject matter that has been linked to this residential expansion (De Stefano, 2004; Hernández, 2013). In water-stressed locations, golf courses have to compete for the water resources with rising domestic demands and existing uses, which are predominantly agricultural (EEA, 2009). For this reason and because golf course irrigation is perceived to provoke significant additional abstraction and, thus, major impacts on the environment and other abstractors, golf course developments have often been the subject of controversy, especially in countries where water resources are under stress (Markwick, 2000; Rodríguez et al., 2007). In order to reduce water consumption associated to golf courses, there have been made recent research to ensure the self-sufficiency. In the case of golf courses associated to residential developments, to estimate the number of dwelling units needed to ensure the self-sufficiency of the golf course in irrigation, i.e., that it can meet its irrigation needs entirely with the effluent of the associated dwellings (Ortuño et al., 2015). In fact, the transfer of water from agriculture to golf is widely criticized and a highly contentious political issue (Rodríguez et al., 2011). Spain provides a good example of the competition for water resources that exists between agriculture and golf course facilities.

2. Study area

From the second half of the twentieth century to the early twenty first century, the Valencian Community experienced a strong socioeconomic development and a subsequent intensification of the urban-touristic demands. The processes of urbanization, industrialization and touristic development have led to the concentration of 77% of the Valencian population in the coastal areas (Rico and Hernández, 2008).

The residential expansion that occurred from the 1990s to 2008 in the east of Spain has impacted the territory considerably, producing changes in land use and transforming the landscape. The total number of dwelling units in Spain increased by almost five million between 2001 and 2011 (Ministerio de Fomento, 2012), which increased the total number of homes from 21.03 to 26.01 million, which constitutes an increase of 23%. This level of growth had not occurred since the stage of development of the 1960s which took place after the Stabilization Plan (1959). This process has been most intense in the Spanish Levante (which includes the regions of Andalusia, Catalonia, Valencia, Murcia and the Balearic Islands), where 55% of the new housing units (about 3 million) were built. From 1997 to 2008 the Valencian Community was the third autonomous community with the highest number of new housing units. During this stage, about 790,000 housing units were built, which constituted an increase of 36% in comparison to the number of housing units existing in 1996 (Burriel, 2008). The case of the province of Alicante is important and illustrative: from 2001 to 2011 a total of 345,410 new homes were registered in the province, which represented 6.1% of the national total. With these numbers the province of Alicante became the third most productive

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