

TODAY

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Spain's megalopolis by the sea

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HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS

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URBAN LANDSCAPE

The coastal megalopolis is here

Barcelona think-tank organises a three-day conference, starting July 19, on the future of Spain's hyperdeveloped coastline

BRADEN PHILLIPS

● If it hasn't done so already, the coast of Spain will soon claim the dubious honour of becoming Europe's first megalopolis. A satellite image would show the emerging reality, with numerous large cities and surrounding development growing fast, moving closer and closer into a single sprawling urban complex.

Driven by the world's second-biggest tourism economy, the development of the Spanish coast is a catch-all phenomenon that includes a jumble of economic, social and cultural factors. To address the complexity of the issue, an independent Barcelona-based think-tank called Intelligent Coast has organised a three-day international symposium—entitled Tourism XXL: The European Megalopolis—beginning today at the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona. The event (which is open to the public for a fee of €180) brings together all the main parties in Spain's coastal development, from environmentalists, urban planners and theorists to developers and government officials (see sidebar).

"The coast is a very important resource, but historically its responsibility has been left to economic forces," says Luis Falcón Martínez de Marañón who, with Silvia Banchini and Manuel Gausa, heads Intelligent Coast. "It has to be a common responsibility with new forms of decision-making and new models of development. These are some of the proposals we hope will be raised during the symposium."

Spain's Mediterranean coast accounts for 44% of its population

and 42% of its gross national product. This year some 18 million tourists will arrive on vacation. Increasingly, as Spain's health care and infrastructure have gained in quality, many of those people have taken up residence. During the past 10 years, Spain's coastal population has jumped 17%, while many cities in England—one of the biggest sources of foreign residents—have either levelled off or declined in population.

The symposium's organisers emphasise that there is no one model that can be applied to the future of Spain's coast.

"Each municipality has its own particular situation that has to be studied," says Falcón.

Not infrequently, the dynamics of development lead to paradoxical situations. Catalonia's L'Escala has long been an area of second residences for local people. But once the land available for building became limited, the city had to fill its coffers by raising property taxes, thereby pricing out the locals, which has led to gentrification.

But the symposium will not only address the problems of rampant coastal development.

"Any discussion of the subject is always negative, but there is a more positive side," says Intelligent Coast's Gausa. "There is a sensual side to this tourism. It may be tacky, but the informality, the colourfulness, the hedonism, give rise to interesting aspects of contemporary life."

Among its other activities, Intelligent Coast recently initiated a masters degree in conjunction with Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, called "Intelligent Coast: new tourist strategies, new territorial structures."



Valencia's Benidorm occupies one extreme in the development of Spain's Mediterranean coast/LAURA CANTARELLA

The dynamics, the agents and the projects

● The symposium Tourism XXL: The European Megalopolis, taking place from July 19-21, is divided into three sections: the dynamics, the agents and the projects. In dynamics, for example, there will be presentations by Americans Edward W. Soja, Professor of Urban Planning at UCLA, and Edward Ritzer, a sociologist, among others. In agents, presentations range from Arnaldo Muñoz, head of Easyjet for Southern Europe to Juan López de Uralde, director of Greenpeace in Spain. That will be followed by roundtable talk moderated by Francesc Muñoz, Pro-

fessor of Urban Geography at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, featuring José Fernández Pérez, in charge of coasts for Spain's Ministry of Environment; Raimon Martínez Fraile, Spain's former Secretary of Tourism and current consultant to AC hotels, and José Miguel Iribas, sociologist and urban planner. Finally, in projects, seven architects will join in a roundtable discussion on projects that could serve as models for the future. The event concludes with a talk between Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas and French writer Michel Houellebecq.



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Towns hope to cover highways

CATALONIA TODAY

● Many of the municipalities bordering Barcelona want to put the highways and trains that connect them with the capital and the rest of Catalonia below ground.

The motivation behind the requests is to remove barriers and to improve quality of life by cutting down on noise and pollution. For example, Badalona, which has various ambitious projects on its to-do list, wants to move the train lines from its coast towards the

centre to gain more coastline. It also wants to cover the C-31, as was recently done for Gran Via in Barcelona. A number of cities want to do the same, including Santa Coloma (B-20); Esplugues (B-23), and Cerdanyola (AP-7).

A lack of funding has kept projects on hold for years. But progress is being made. In the case of El Prat and L'Hospitalet, construction of the high-speed train, or Ave, has helped satisfy a longstanding wish to put the regional rail line below

ground, and will be finished in three years. It took 25 years, but Sant Feliu also just got funding from the Generalitat and the federal Public Works Department to cover its railway, reuniting the two halves of the city. Santa Coloma has also received the green light to cover its section of the B-20. Some towns, such as Sant Just Desvern and Molins de Rei, are requesting cheaper acoustic barriers, including trees, rather than amore expensive tunnel.