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# Territorial planning in times of crisis (2008-2022): paradigm shift and re-growth on the Coast of Alicante (Spain)

Planificación territorial en tiempos de crisis (2008–2022):  
cambio de paradigma y recrecimiento en el litoral de Alicante (España)

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## **Abstract**

The effects of the health crisis associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, which overlapped with the consequences of the 2008 economic crisis, have had a major social and economic impact on the monofunctional tourist territories. Urban and tourism development has been possible on the Alicante coast thanks to environmental and urban planning regulations that permit an intense occupation of the coast and pre-coastal area. The real estate crisis gave rise to a change in paradigm, and regulatory reforms have been implemented based on the guiding principle of environmental sustainability and balanced territorial development. This study aims to evaluate whether this paradigm shift in territorial planning has translated into urban planning and has modified urban-touristic dynamics on the Alicante coast. To achieve this, we have analyzed official statistical information, municipal and regional-scale territorial planning documents and conducted interviews with stakeholders (government authorities, private sector representatives, civil society groups, and experts in territorial and tourism planning). The results reveal that the actions have not been uniform along the coast. The different responses (return to pre-pandemic conditions, that is, the continuous growth of the activity as opposed to the containment of the urban and tourist development in line with policies to ensure sustainability and climate change adaptation) reveal the existence of conflicts and tension between the different sectors and social agents.

**Keywords:** tourism; planning; land uses; post-pandemic; real estate market.

## **Resumen**

Los efectos de la crisis sanitaria asociada a la pandemia COVID-19, que se han superpuesto a las consecuencias de la crisis económica de 2008, han tenido un gran impacto social y económico en los territorios turísticos monofuncionales. En el litoral de Alicante el desarrollo urbanístico y del turismo ha sido posible gracias a una normativa ambiental y urbanística orientada a permitir una intensa ocupación del litoral y el prelitoral. La crisis inmobiliaria supuso un cambio de paradigma y se sucedieron reformas normativas auspiciadas por el principio rector de la sostenibilidad ambiental y el desarrollo territorial equilibrado. Este trabajo tiene por objetivo evaluar si este cambio de paradigma en la planificación territorial se ha trasladado a la planificación urbana y ha modificado las dinámicas urbano-turísticas en el litoral de Alicante. Para ello se ha analizado información estadística oficial, documentos de planificación territorial a escala municipal y regional y se han realizado entrevistas con las partes implicadas (administración, sector privado, grupos de la sociedad civil, y expertos en planificación territorial y turística). Los resultados ponen de manifiesto que las acciones no han sido uniformes en todo el litoral turístico. Las diferentes

respuestas (vuelta a las condiciones pre-pandemia, es decir, crecimiento continuo de la actividad frente a una contención del crecimiento urbano y turístico en línea con las políticas de sostenibilidad y adaptación al cambio climático) evidencian, asimismo, la existencia de conflictos y tensiones entre los sectores y agentes sociales interesados.

**Palabras clave:** turismo; planificación; usos del suelo; post-pandemia; mercado inmobiliario.

## 1 Introduction

Over the last few decades, the territorial transformation experienced in some areas of the world related to the development of the sun and beach tourism model has conditioned the trajectory of these spaces (Muñoz Arroyave, 2018). Within the context of liberal capitalism, the dynamics of territorial transformation preceded their possible legal and administrative regulation (Rando, 2019; Farinós, 2021a). The prevalence of urban policies that privileged growth over a balanced territorial order has resulted in a radical change in the physiognomy of the towns (Romero, 2011) and, sometimes, in the emergence of corruption mechanisms and profligacy (Romero, 2019). One of these spaces is the Spanish Mediterranean coast, an area of economic opportunity due to its natural conditions, which has been intensely altered with hardly any administrative control. In fact, in most cases, the government has encouraged real estate transformation processes, particularly on a local scale (Gaja, 2008). Despite the short-term wealth generated, the profoundly altered territories have experienced an irreversible destruction of their natural environment, with urban models that are disconnected from the traditional urban evolution and the creation of new social challenges and needs for services and facilities that are not easy to integrate. The current territorial planning processes respond to other dynamics, marked by establishing sustainability as a guiding principle (Farinós & Olcina, 2022). However, their implementation has been slow and not without resistance on the local scale. Furthermore, academic reflections have arisen regarding the need to regulate these dynamics of accelerated transformation, which, in some cases, contemplate controlled degrowth processes as the only way to guarantee territorial sustainability. However, there are also opposing or less radical positions.

The Alicante coast is one of these territories of opportunity. It is a geographical space on the Spanish Mediterranean coastline that has experienced intense transformation since the middle of the last century. The effects of the different periods of urban and tourism expansion from the 1960s have generated a considerable development of the built-up area on the coastline, giving rise to intense exploitation of natural resources and negative ecological footprints (water, carbon, land).

The result has been significantly modifying the natural environment and consolidating an urban continuum for tourism-residential use, placing the province as one of Spain's largest and most consolidated destinations.

The creation of this urbanised coastal space within the territory of Alicante is exclusively due to urban planning. The lack of a tradition of territorial planning processes on a supra-municipal scale, together with the very late approval of regional or subregional territorial plans or strategies, has led, in many cases, to a lack of coordination between one level (regional or subregional plans) and another (general urban planning) and the predominance of the latter in land transformation processes (Romero, 2009). The Region of Valencia is an excellent example of the preeminence of urban planning over territorial planning on a state level because the approval and effective development of the Valencian Territorial Strategy (Regional Department of the Environment, Water, Urban Planning and Housing, 2011) took place in 2011, when the last and most transforming real estate boom had already occurred, which was particularly intense on the Mediterranean coast (Burriel, 2009). In addition, there was a lack of subregional planning (called Integrated Territorial Action Plans), which would have regulated, to a great extent, the aspirations to transform the land on a local scale rapidly. Of the whole area of the Region of Valencia, the Alicante coast underwent the most remarkable urban and residential transformation in Spain from 1998-2008, becoming the country's largest park of second homes.

After this phase of residential expansion, the onset of the 2008 economic crisis had a major socio-economic impact in Spain. The sudden brake of real estate development in the following years led to a significant contraction of the overall economic activity of the province of Alicante (Mantecón et al., 2016). The consequences led to a considerable economic deceleration associated with, among other factors, the almost total paralysis of the real estate sector. This situation is illustrated by simply comparing the 227 142 new construction permits for residential use in 2005 with the 23 000 in 2011 (Hernández et al., 2015). The real estate and global economic crises considerably limited the possibilities for external demand to compensate for the decrease in internal demand. Furthermore, the toughening of requirements to access loans led to the closure of many companies, and economic activity slowed down due to the dependency on the construction sector and tourist arrivals (Banco de España, 2017). Different factors illustrate the impact of this crisis: a) the increase in unemployment, from 8.01% at the end of 2007 to 26.94% in the first quarter of 2013 when it peaked (INE, 2023a); b) the existence of a large volume of housing stock, amounting to 649 780 at the end of 2008 (Ministerio de Fomento, 2013a), especially in Alicante, which accounted for 8.06% of the national total; and c) the decrease in the value of the real estate. The national territory

recorded an average reduction of 23% between the first quarter of 2008 and the second quarter of 2011, which was higher on a municipal scale. Alicante's municipalities, such as Torrevieja, Denia, Villajoyosa, or Calpe, recorded reductions of between 30% and 49% (Ministerio de Fomento, 2013b).

A few years later, a period of recovery began in terms of real estate growth and tourism activity until the paralysis of the activity due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The lockdown and the restrictions caused the paralysis of tourist flows and the closure of most businesses that form part of the tourism industry (hotels, restaurants, retail outlets). As a result, the principal indicators of the tourism sector contracted significantly: a) the contribution of tourism to national GDP fell from 12.4% in 2019 to 5.5% in 2020; b) employment from 13.2% to 11.8%, respectively (DATAESTUR, 2022), partially attenuated by the adoption of temporary layoffs (ERTEs); and c) a reduction in the number of tourists, movements and overnight stays, especially international tourists, with a reduction of almost 80%, almost double that of Spanish tourists (INE, 2022a, 2022b). The most significant impacts occurred in those autonomous regions where the tourism sector accounted for the largest share of their economic sector, such as Catalonia, Canary Islands, Balearic Islands, Region of Valencia, and Andalusia (Escudero & Casado, 2020; Simancas et al., 2020; Vera & Ivars, 2020). The COVID-19 crisis, akin to the economic downturn of 2008, has exposed the susceptibility to crises of monofunctional spaces specializing in tourist-residential activities, exemplified by the coast of Alicante. However, after the lockdown and the most intense restrictions on economic activity, the housing construction and tourist sector began to thrive again in 2021 and has, until now, hinted at a resurgence of urban and tourist dynamics conducive to growth.

The paradigm shift in territorial planning and its incorporation into tourism and urban policies at the local level can mitigate this vulnerability, facilitating a novel approach to sustainable territorial development that fosters heightened resilience in the face of crises. However, has the transformation in the paradigm of territorial planning manifested as a shift in urban and tourism growth in the Alicante coast municipalities? The primary objective of this study is to verify whether the paradigm shift in territorial planning 1) has translated into urban and tourist planning; 2) and has modified urban-tourist dynamics during the period 2008-2022, after the real estate crack of 2008 and the COVID-19 health crisis. We formulate three research questions to pursue this objective: RQ1) Has local-scale territorial planning adapted to the new paradigms?; RQ2) Has territorial or urban planning played a role in explaining urban and touristic trends?; RQ3) What reasons account for the results obtained regarding the adaptation of local planning and the observed urban-touristic trends? After the introduction, the article is structured into four sections.

The following presents the study area, the data, and the methodology employed. Subsequently, the results section, organized based on the evaluated information, is nuanced by the outcomes of twelve interviews conducted with stakeholders from various domains. In section 3.1, we analyze regional-level territorial planning documents; in section 3.2, we examine the status of local-scale urban planning; section 3.3 delves into the evolution of urban-touristic dynamics. Finally, the discussion section synthesizes the results, drawing connections with other studies' findings and concluding with final remarks.

## **2 Data and methodology**

### **2.1 Area of study**

The study area for this research comprises 32 municipalities located along the coastal and pre-coastal regions of the province of Alicante. This area witnessed the most significant territorial repercussions of the real estate boom between 1996 and 2006 (Capdepón, 2016). Notably, 56% of land uses within the initial 500 meters from the coast underwent artificialization, resulting in profound social, economic, and demographic disparities between the coastal and hinterland areas. Based on population criteria, the study area accounted for 66% of the provincial population in 2022. Additionally, the chosen municipalities represent 72.7% of provincial dwellings, and they also exhibit a significant presence in terms of vacation homes, constituting 86.1% of secondary residences, according to the 2011 Census data. Furthermore, the 32 municipalities encompass 97% of overnight stays in hotels and tourist apartments in 2022.

The sample of municipalities encompasses the two land occupation models in Alicante, defined according to the occupation density of the territory, types of buildings, tourist accommodation supply, and demand segments. One of the models is concentrated, and the other is extensive. The first, clearly identified in the destination town of Benidorm, implies a high density of high-rise buildings. The ample supply of regulated accommodation (hotels, apartments, and campsites), distributed through sales channels, generates a dynamism that enables tourism activity to be developed throughout the year. The second model is related to the real estate business, based on the construction of complexes with different types of buildings, apartments, and detached or terraced single-family homes aimed at the holiday home or rental market, generating an extensive occupation of the territory.

## 2.2 Data and methodology

First, a detailed analysis of the regulations and different territorial, regulatory, and strategic planning documents on a regional and local scale of 32 coastal and pre-coastal municipalities of Alicante has been conducted. We have consulted the territorial plans available on the website of the Regional Department of Environment, Water, Infrastructures and Territory of the Generalitat Valenciana, together with the urban plans of the selected area of study of a municipal scale, available in the "urban planning information" section and the "urban planning in force by municipality" section of the afore-mentioned regional government department (<https://politicaterritorial.gva.es/>). In the latter case, the information in the urban planning database of the Generalitat Valenciana has been completed with the consultation of the selected municipalities' websites (urban planning departments of the local governments). With this information, a comparative analysis has been made of these regional and local plans to compare their criteria and guiding principles, according to the date of approval, and to assess the incorporation of new guidelines based on the fulfilment of objectives of sustainability and climate change adaptation.

Second, concerning the quantitative variables, urban planning dynamics (urban area and real estate development) have been analysed with data from the Statistics Service of the Urban Real Estate Cadastre. For the analysis of the real estate market, housing construction permits (College of Quantity Surveyors, Technical Architects, and Construction Engineers of Alicante), sales operations of new and used housing (Spanish National Institute of Statistics), and housing sale transactions (Official College of Property and Mercantile Registrars) have been used for the period 2008- 2023. The evolution of the tourism dynamics has been analyzed through data referring to the different types of regulated accommodation supply (hotels, apartments) and tourist demand generated through overnight stays. The data have been drawn from the regional administration website (Turisme de la Comunitat Valenciana) and the Spanish National Statistical Institute (INE, 2023b).

Third, questionnaires have been conducted with stakeholders interested in the themes analysed in this research to complement the results obtained in the previous phases. A total of 20 interviews were proposed, and a response was received from 12. Specifically, there were conducted three questionnaires to regional government representatives (including the Spatial Planning manager of the Generalitat Valenciana) and experts or those responsible for urban planning of the municipal corporations; three questionnaires to the business sector (businesspeople from the real estate sector

and business associations); three questionnaires to civil society groups; and other three questionnaires to territorial and tourism planning experts.

The questionnaires had 18 questions and were structured into four blocks, which addressed the following issues: 1) Real estate market trends (new construction and second-hand housing) (2 questions); 2) Tourism activity trends (4 questions), addressing matters related to the perceived evolution in holiday housing, the emergence of new digital accommodation platforms or the relationship between regulatory frameworks and tourism trends; 3) The international context, specifically the possible impacts derived from Brexit and Covid-19 on the housing market, the type of tourists, or potential changes in tourism policies (5 questions); and 4) territorial planning, where the interviewees were asked about urban planning regulations and their relationship with the guiding principle of sustainability and climate change adaptation, or the influence that specific spatial planning documents have had on the real estate market and tourism development (7 questions). Open-ended questions were alternated with closed questions for the respondents to choose between a series of options.

### **3 Results**

#### **3.1 Territorial planning development on the Valencian Community: a paradigm shift**

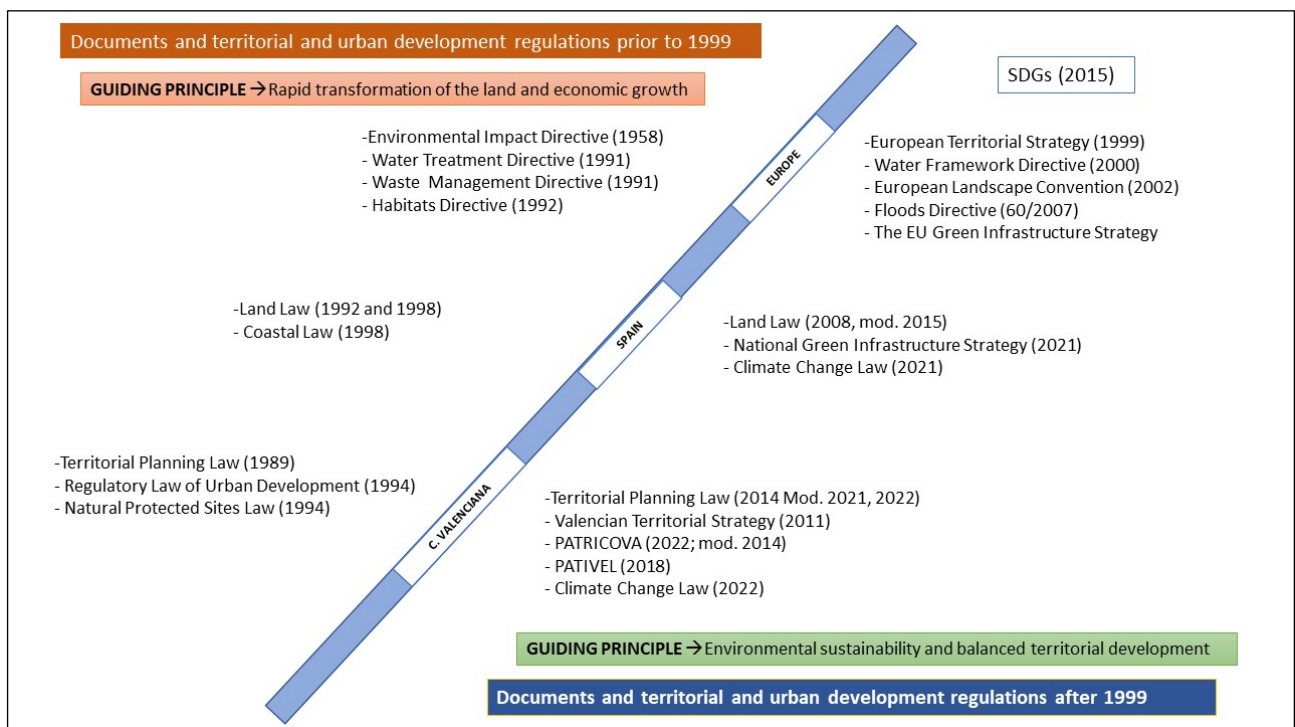
The passing of the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) in 1999 represented a significant turnaround in the territorial planning practices in European countries. A new guiding principle was established in territorial planning: sustainable territorial development. From this moment, territorial planning pursues the preservation of the environment and development consistent with the surroundings. This objective has become the principal characteristic of land use planning and other social, political, and economic processes. Its function is to guarantee the participation of the affected population, coordinate the different sectoral policies, respect the values, cultures, and interests of the various administrative scales (regions, districts), and consider the current situation, trend, and long-term evolution of territorial policies. The different Territorial Agendas (Agenda 2007, revised in 2010, and Agenda 2030, passed in 2020) have established specific objectives for the consolidation of the principles of the ESDP in the different countries (Farinós, 2021b).

The growth of the real estate bubble in Spain occurred under the Land Law of 1998 (Law 6/1998, of 13 April), which liberalised the urban development processes without heeding the recommendations of the ESDP (Figure 1). However, the national government change in 2004



initiated a process of modifying urban legislation to incorporate sustainability principles into territorial planning. The result was the passing of the Land Law 2008 (Royal Legislative Decree 2/2008), revised in 2015 (Royal Legislative Decree 7/2015), to incorporate regulations regarding housing refurbishment. Recently, a crucial step for territorial planning has been the passing of the Climate Change Law (Law 7/2021), expanded regionally by the Valencian Climate Change Law (Law 6/2022), which establishes the obligation to consider the effects of climate change in urban planning actions and the interventions in the urban environment with territorial sustainability criteria (Art. 21).

Figure 1. Regulations and official documents drawn from different administrative levels which have permitted urban development and territorial planning



Source: own elaboration

At the regional level, in the Valencian Community, four stages can be distinguished in the development of the territorial planning policies (Salom, 1995; Burriel, 2009; Farinós & Peiro, 2019; Olcina & Vera, 2023):

- 1st stage, between 1982 and 1989, after passing the Statute of Autonomy and the transfer of competencies corresponding to territorial planning. In this stage, some territorial-related European directives were adapted.

- 2nd stage, between 1989 and 2011. First Territorial Planning law was passed, and a land mobilising urban policy was developed with the passing of the Regulatory Law of Urban Development (1994), favouring the development of "developers' urban planning". In this stage, there was a lack of belief in the territorial policy on a regional and sub-regional scale. The first sub-regional plans were elaborated but were never approved. In 2003, the first version of the Sectoral Territorial Action Plan on Flood Risk Prevention in the Valencian Community (PATRICOVA) was approved and updated in 2015. It is the first plan that restricts land uses to certain activities based on their degree of flood hazard. Furthermore, the second territorial planning law was passed (2004).
- 3rd stage, between 2011 and 2015. The Valencian Territorial Strategy was passed. The elaboration of sub-regional and sectoral plans was reactivated, although they were never processed for their approval.
- 4th stage, from 2015 to the present. The third Territorial Planning Law was passed (2015), with subsequent modifications (2021 and 2022, Legislative Decree 1/2021, and Decree-Law 4/2022, respectively). In this last stage, a new commitment has been made to territorial policy on a sub-regional scale, and steps have been taken to promote the supra-municipal scale and metropolitan area level.

In the first place, since the crisis of 2008, the most outstanding achievement of territorial planning has been the approval and development of the Valencian Territorial Strategy (2011) (Muñoz & Domenech, 2012), an essential reference framework on a regional scale for regulating the processes of assigning new land uses. The strategy sought to adapt sustainability principles in territorial planning after years of enormous territorial transformation during the decade of the property bubble (1998-2008). Two fundamental contributions to the future territory management are particularly noteworthy in this document's voluminous content: 1) the establishment of the Green Infrastructure and Landscape as principal elements for the territorial structuring of the Region of Valencia and the assignment of new land uses and 2) the establishment of a series of criteria for the growth of residential land, which has become the cornerstone for controlling the real estate expansion in the Valencian territory. Along these same lines, the strategy includes indices of land occupation for economic activities and specific criteria for residential land occupation and economic activities in rural municipalities. The approval of this strategy had profound implications and did not generate consensus among the different groups of stakeholders.

In addition to the cultural change caused by the bursting of the real estate bubble, having a Territorial Strategy document has helped this change in mentality. Public administration.

From my point of view, the tendency is to go towards too restrictive policies. There should be a more outstanding balance, which would allow actual sustainable economic development. Business sector.

In the second place, the combined effects of the alteration of the coastal strip caused during the years of the property bubble (Burriel, 2008) and, after the economic crisis, with the reactivation of the activity in the construction sector in coastal municipalities from 2016, led to the elaboration of another noteworthy milestone in territorial planning: the Territorial Action Plan of the Green Infrastructure on the Coast of the Region of Valencia (PATIVEL), approved in 2018. This plan is paradigmatic to protect a fragile and scarce space where opposing uses and interests often converge. Hence, there is a need to address its planning from the principles of conservation and sustainable management and within the framework of new criteria for territorial planning as it is based on the concept of green infrastructure, an essential tool in sustainable territorial planning in different countries and regions across the world (Vera-Rebollo et al., 2019). The PATIVEL seeks to protect 7 500 ha of the region's coastline, representing 12% of the land that has not yet been urbanised in the 500-meter-wide strip from the coastline. This protected land includes as well as the spaces that are environmentally catalogued, the tiny coastal land that is still undeveloped or for which there is no urban plan that has been approved or is being developed. To carry out this protection, the declassification of developable land with no approved programme has been contemplated, which is the newest and most controversial aspect of PAVITEL. Although most stakeholders appreciate the influence this plan could have on future real estate and tourism development, generating new opportunities for tourism development based on the environmental value of the territorial elements, some coastal municipalities consider this plan to have arrived too late as the area is practically urbanised. Additionally, the approval and implementation of this plan have generated conflicts with some stakeholders. After its approval in 2018, the appeal of a company engaged in the real estate business on the coast gave rise to a sentence by the Superior Court of Justice of the Region of Valencia, which annulled the PATIVEL in 2021. However, in May 2022, the Supreme Court overturned this ruling and guaranteed the plan's validity. For this reason, some interviewees assure that they maintain considerable doubts about the effectiveness of territorial plans in limiting urban-tourist growth:

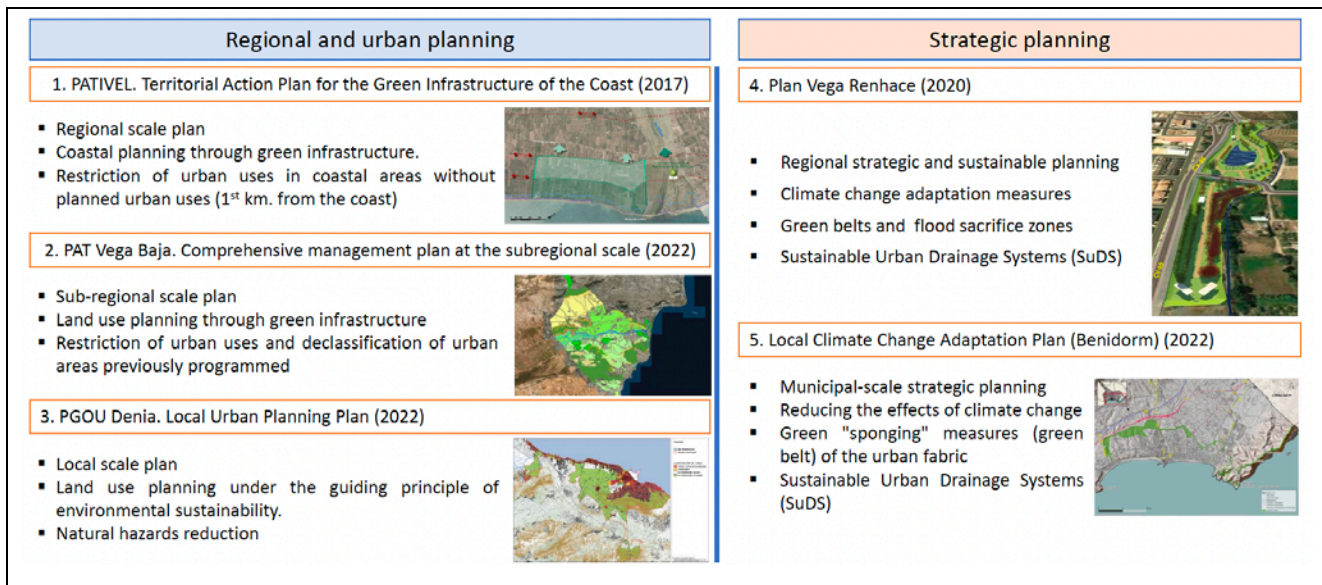
It remains to be seen if the territorial plans can coexist and limit the urban plans without everything ending up in court. I am pessimistic, especially if there is an alternation of government in the regional administration. Expert on territorial planning.

Regarding territorial subregional plans elaborated according to the principles of environmental sustainability, the Territorial Action Plan (PAT) of the Vega Baja stands out, which is currently in its administrative processing phase (2022). This plan contemplates the restriction of urban uses and the declassification of developable areas previously planned by the municipalities in the district planning area. Similarly to the PATIVEL, most stakeholders, regardless of the group they belong to, consider that although the Subregional PATs could significantly impact the real estate and tourism dynamics, they have arrived too late because there has never been a culture of territorial planning in the Region of Valencia, unlike other autonomous regions. In any case, there is a fair amount of uncertainty regarding how these plans will affect tourism and real estate development and the implications that the approval of the PATs could have. One of the reasons explaining the delay in approving these plans is the existence of parallel competencies between the different administrations, which has constituted an obstacle to the effective implementation of subregional PATs since it required a high level of coordination and consensus between the region and municipal governments. In some cases, this delay is explained by the opposition of certain local governments to these new regulations, which has even led to public protests against the PAT of Vega Baja (Mármol, 2022, April 12) or the paralysis of other plans, such as the PAT of Alicante and Elche, due to the lack of interest in developing it by the city councils (Olcina & Vera, 2023). Likewise, the lack of budget concreteness and cooperation and coordination mechanisms between administrations has affected its lack of development.

Despite these limitations, the paradigm shift in territorial planning has allowed, in just over ten years, the creation of instruments that are examples of good practices at the regional and national levels (Figure 2). At the local and subregional scale, in this sense, two examples of strategic territorial planning that incorporate the principles of territorial sustainability and adaptation to climate change also stand out:

- The Plan Vega Renhace (2020) contains structural and territorial planning actions to increase the resilience of the district to extreme events (Olcina, 2021).
- The Climate Change Adaptation Plan of the municipality of Benidorm (2022) includes eighty measures for adapting facilities, economic activities, and urban planning to the effects of climate change based on environmental sustainability principles.

Figure 2. Good practice in the territorial planning (regulatory and strategic) of the Region of Valencia (2017-2022)



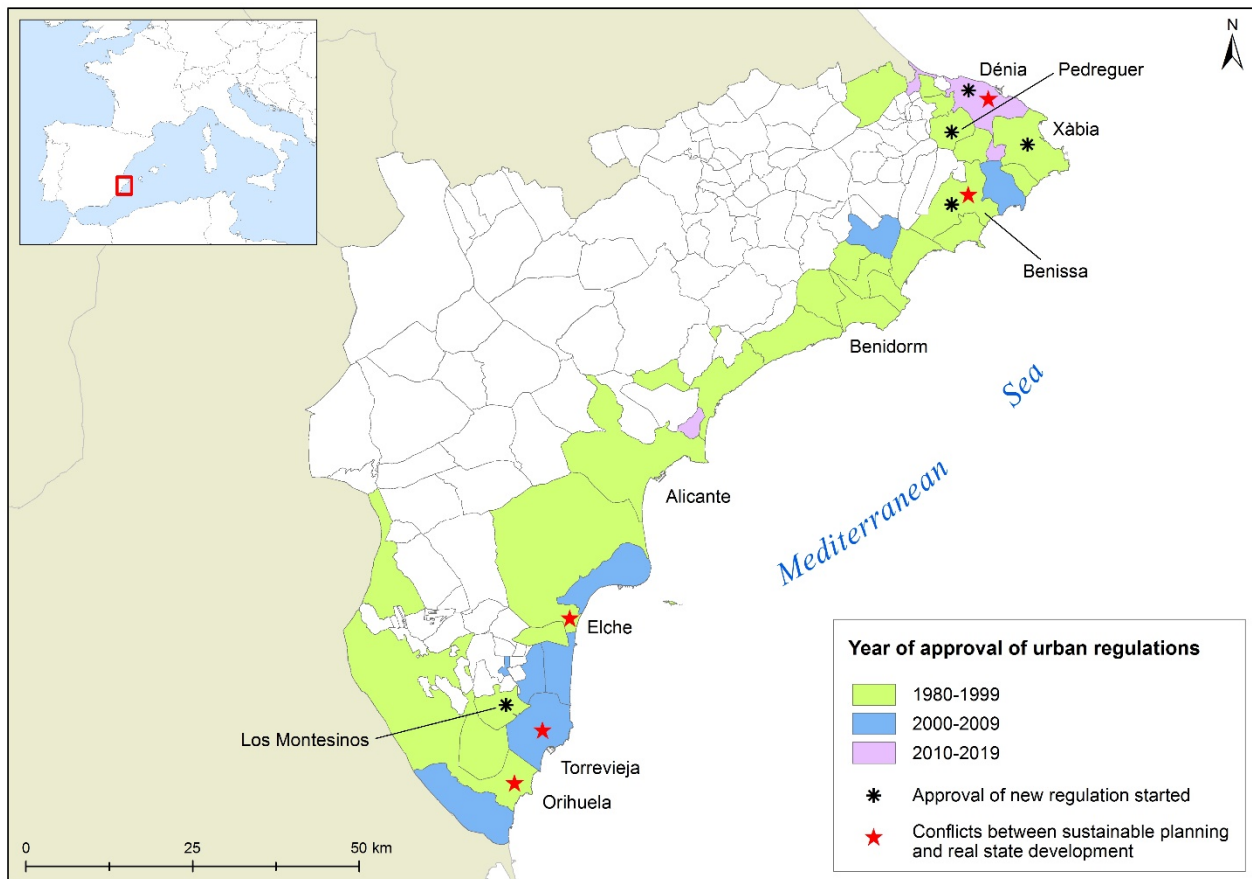
Source: own elaboration

### 3.2 Local urban planning: territorial conflicts and slow adaptation

In broad terms, it can be stated that the paradigm shift in the territorial planning of the Valencian Community has not yet been implemented at the local scale. The analysis of the urban planning documents of the 32 municipalities reveals the obsolescence of many of these documents, given the period that has elapsed since their approval (Figure 3).

Those that prevailed mainly were passed between 1980 and 1999 (n=23; 73%). In other words, they were in force for between 30 and 40 years. Those approved in subsequent periods (n= 9) or those being processed in 2022 (n= 5; 15,5%) were in the minority. Only two have completed the whole procedure since 2008, adapting to the Royal Legislative Decree 2/2008, through which the text of the Land Law was revised. However, only the more recent urban plans incorporate some of the tools required by the subsequently passed norms regulating land use, for example, landscape studies, environmental assessment studies, or flood potential studies. In other words, there has been a prolonged adaptation to the new requirements established by the territorial planning and land regulations in force.

Figure 3. Urban regulations and conflicts (1990-2022)



Source: own elaboration

This urban planning obsolescence reflects the reluctance and local conflicts experienced by municipal corporations to begin or complete the procedures for approving a new general structural plan (formerly PGOU). In some cases, the barriers are related to the costs and studies required for approval, mainly due to the conflicts between stakeholders in incorporating the new regulatory requirements for a more sustainable development or climate change adaptation. These requirements have generated discontent in some municipalities (Denia, Benissa, Elche, Torre Vieja, and Orihuela) among the real estate developers who consider these regulations could slow down the urban-tourism development, viewed as an economic engine in these territories. Consequently, legal appeals have been made against these regulations, either during their processing or after passing them. These appeals have led to their annulment, generating conflict between urban developers and the regulatory frameworks that advocate a more sustainable territorial model. The conflicts between different stakeholders during the whole procedure of a General Structural Plan have been particularly prevalent in the northern and southern coast of the province, where the reactivation of actions to promote new construction has shown an upward trend since 2015,

temporarily interrupted by the pandemic. The cases of Campello and Denia are representative. The General Plan of Campello was approved by the Territorial Commission of Urban Development (CTU in 2011) but was annulled by a ruling of the Supreme Court on 31 March 2016 due to the absence of an economic-financial study and the 1986 General Urban Development Plan was readopted. The particularity of this nullity is that it occurs due to an appeal filed by a restaurant whose plot was expropriated, which argued that the reclassification of the land on which it was located (near the beach) lacked an economic-financial study. However, the appellants only sought the annulment of the classification of the land they owned, not the complete annulment of the plan carried out by the Supreme Court. Denia's municipality has promoted six urban development plans over the last ten years. None of them have been approved because they do not comply with the territorial planning laws or due to the developers' limited resources. Therefore, the Transitory Urban Development Regulation, according to D112/2013, was annulled by a ruling of the Supreme Court on 29 June 2017. In November 2022, the plenary session of the Town Council of Denia approved the General Structural Plan. Finally, in May 2023, this approval was refuted by the Territorial Commission of Urban Development of the Generalitat despite the local press reporting that some political parties may present an appeal. This plan included a comprehensive approach to natural risk and the restriction of developable land in the coming years, closely related to the legal appeals made by various pressure groups, among which is the Association of Promoters.

Two factors identified by the territorial agents explain the slow updating of the general structural plans in Alicante's coastal municipalities. The first is the complexity of the administrative procedure to process an urban plan due to technical and political reasons and the many agents involved. Processing and implementing an urban plan require political stability or agreement between political groups, which is difficult to fulfil. According to one of the stakeholders interviewed, involved in a general plan review process:

For us, political stability is essential to finish the general plan. I understand those municipalities with a general plan from the 80s or 90s that do not want to renew it and start from scratch if they can modify it and if it is helpful for them. I understand it perfectly because starting a new procedure from scratch is tricky and is a process that can take many years. It entails such extraordinary complexity that without political stability or an agreement between political groups, it is impossible to process and complete it. Public administration.

Furthermore, excessive administrative procedures involving many levels of government are needed to complete this process satisfactorily. The plan requires favourable sectoral reports, such as the Environmental Assessment and Strategic Territorial reports which involve different state and regional departments, creating the need for administrative coordination in a process that can take years, as in many cases, there is a shortage of resources in the public administrations which are overburdened, and it is difficult for them to elaborate these reports. Therefore, we could say that the legal process for approving an urban plan is not sufficiently flexible to adapt to the needs and challenges of the territory, which is in permanent transformation. In some cases, a law is needed to harmonise the issuance and scope of the sectoral reports on the state and regional levels to standardise the process and the direction of administrative silence so that the failure to issuance a report does not prevent or paralyse the definitive approval of the spatial planning instrument. This complexity, together with the growing demands for environmental and territorial protection to favour sustainable territorial development, often lead to a lack of motivation of the local councils to begin a new general plan project, and they often opt to approve occasional modifications to the general plans approved in the 1980s and 1990s. The complexity and slowness of the process were a deterrent factor for the local administration, which expressed the need to make the procedure more flexible and adapt it to the rhythms of socioeconomic and territorial changes.

Given what it costs to approve a general plan, they should be much more flexible tools (...). The urban plans must be able to adapt quickly, relatively quickly, to these changes (in society). It should not be a stuck tool that is almost impossible to move. I am in favour of plans that can adapt to society's evolution. Public administration.

In this respect, a second factor identified by the territorial agents interviewed is the existence of opposing interests. Apart from specific conflicts arising due to environmental matters, the main conflicts that have prevented the approval of general structural plans since the passing of the last land law are related to the limitation to urban growth. Applying the new legislation in territorial planning, in many cases, would reduce urban growth and real estate business expectations. Therefore, there is a political polarisation and division concerning the urban development of specific areas, such as the Alicante coast, where there is intense pressure from construction and real estate companies as they have an enormous weight on political decisions. These opposing interests between landowners and the government have led to a litigation culture in urban development in the Region of Valencia, where discrepancies arising from territorial or urban development plans are settled in the courts, often leading to the suspension and annulment of the proposed projects. Due to formal, administrative, or processing shortcomings, the courts often



reject the whole plan instead of stipulating rectifying the aspects to correct. This element would be necessary to reform on a state level, as some stakeholders of the business sector claimed:

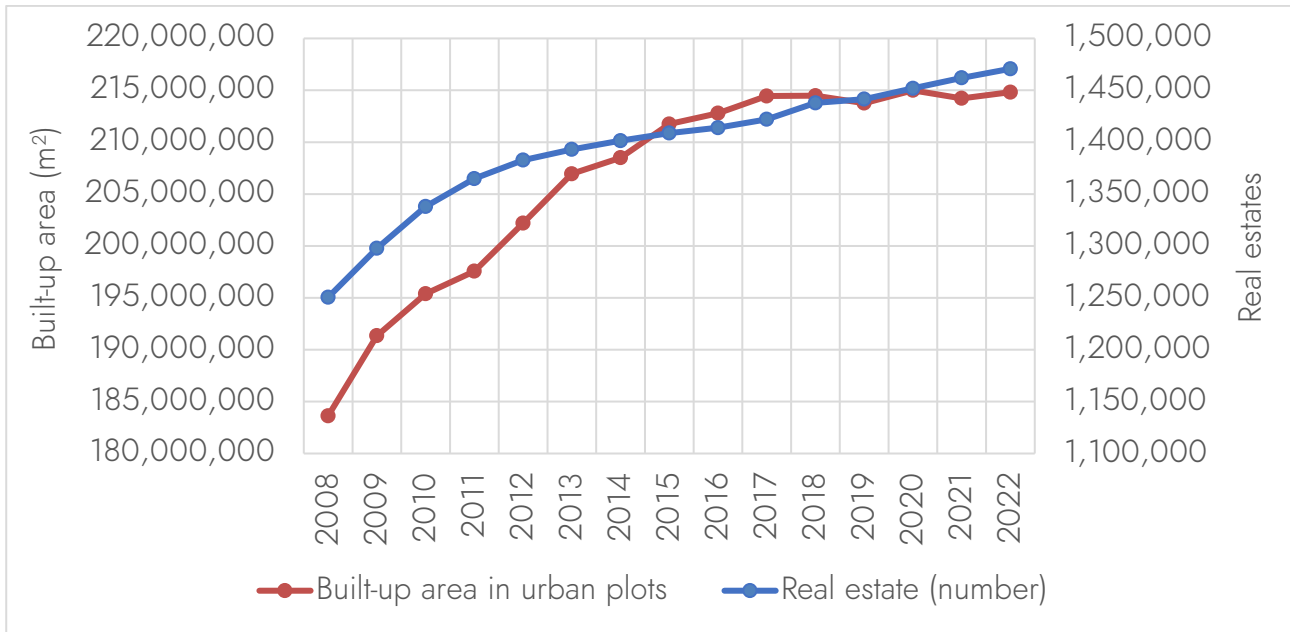
(It is necessary) a new state law on sectoral reports and the reform of state legislation to avoid the radical nullity of the General Municipal Planning Plans and other planning instruments. (Also it is necessary) a law that harmonizes the issuance and scope of sectoral reports of state and regional competence on everything that would unify and standardize the issuance period, ideally, of 3 months, and the meaning of silence, ideally, positive, without prejudice to the inexcusable obligation of the administration to always report in the form and on time and that its non-issuance does not prevent or paralyze the procedure for the final approval of the planning instrument. Business sector.

Considering all the above, although more than half of the stakeholders consider that progress has been made in achieving an urban development plan adapted to the guiding principle of sustainable development, it may be confirmed that there is still ground to be covered in addressing the economic, social, and economic challenges and the management of natural risks, climate change or the change in energy models.

### **3.3 Urban development and tourism dynamics: from the real estate crisis to re-growth**

Despite the advancements made in territorial planning in the last decade, it has been demonstrated that municipal councils face limitations in aligning urban planning plans with the principles of territorial sustainability. The impact of these dynamics can be verified quantitatively in the evolution of urban and tourism dynamics. The information available on a municipal level regarding the growth of real estate and the urban space in the area of study enables the identification of two large periods in terms of the development of the real estate market on the Alicante coast (Figure 4): a first period between 2008 and 2012 in which the growth of the two variables is explained by the continuation of the dynamics initiated during the property boom; and a second period from 2012 to the present day, in which the growth has slowed down but continues, particularly in the municipalities where conflicts have been identified between the local governments which have attempted to promote initiatives aimed at renewing urban planning and pressure groups from the real estate sector.

Figure 4. Evolution of real estate and the urban area on the Alicante coast



Source: Statistics Service of the Urban Real Estate Cadastre

These dynamics are particularly prevalent in the Vega Baja district on the province's southern coast, where the growth trends in real estate and the urban area have increased. Some stakeholders from the public administration state that, despite a growing trend in construction, there is no direct translation into an equivalent increase in urban surface, as growth has occurred on urban land gaps that have been filled.

The urban land and urban surface have not changed so much. But it is true that when preparing the general structural plan (...), we have detected that it is an urban land full of voids, which has been filling up because there were many vacant plots. Public administration.

The data corresponding to the construction of new housing and new or second-hand trading show the cyclical behaviour of real estate activity as a local manifestation of the different global crises (Figure 5). After the bursting of the property bubble associated with the 2008 financial crisis, housing construction began to recover from 2012 until it peaked before the COVID-19 crisis, when there was a sudden drop in activity. The property market recovered not only due to the boost in construction but also due to the rise of demand for second-hand housing.

Figure 5. New housing construction initiated in coastal and pre-coastal municipalities, new homes and second homes trading in the province of Alicante



Source: College of Quantity Surveyors, Technical Architects, and Construction Engineers of Alicante and Spanish National Institute of Statistics

This analysis of trends coincides with that carried out by the stakeholders, which enriches it with some nuances. The increase in demand was explained mainly by the demand of European buyers with a high purchasing power for second homes, which has not been influenced so much by macroeconomic figures.

Even in the worst period of the crisis, it is also true that here there was a real estate movement of people who did not have a crisis, there were buyers with high purchasing power who have not disappeared at any time, and there were people who have done business and have taken advantage of that moment. Public administration.

The incorporation of residents from Eastern Europe is exponential, initially people of Russian origin, and currently, it is worth highlighting people from countries bordering Russia, such as Poland, who are acquiring homes, mainly second-hand homes. Territorial planning experts.

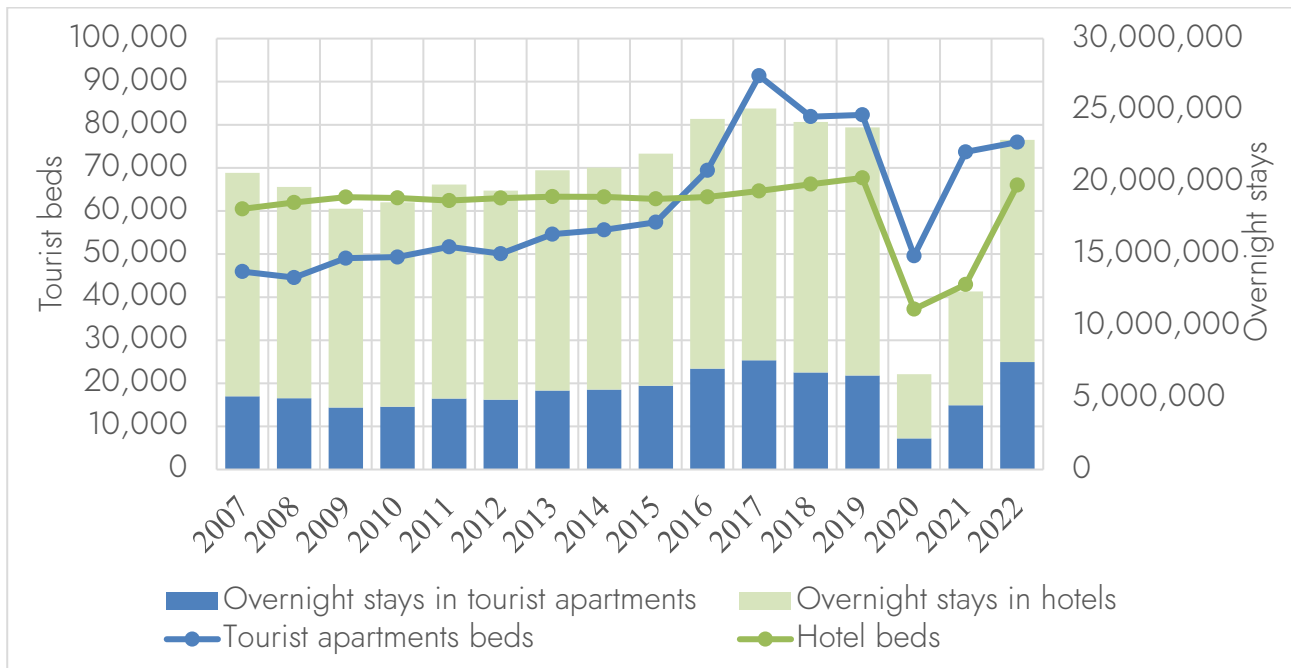
The recovery cycle, which had been growing in 2012, seems to have broken due to the tensions related to the increase in the price of money, the interest rates, and the effect of the Ukraine war. Even so, in 2022, 80% of the real estate under construction in the province was in the study area. Some stakeholders indicate that the current situation arising from the COVID crisis and the Ukraine

war has activated an increase in interest rates, and, with the high levels of inflation, there has been an increase in prices, which has slowed demand. However, the province of Alicante is the third in Spain in terms of accumulated new housing stock (it was the first in 2016), only behind Madrid and Barcelona. It also concentrates more than 35 000 properties, according to the 2021 data of the Ministry of Transport, Mobility, and Urban Agenda, which is practically 8% of the national total. Despite the current unfavorable macroeconomic context, the reactivation of new housing construction is evident. In the same sense, in 2022, Alicante was the third Spanish province in terms of the number of housing sale transactions after Madrid and Barcelona, with 49 977 operations (Official College of Property and Mercantile Registers of Spain, 2022), 87% of which corresponded to second-hand properties. The province recorded the highest growth in property sales between 2021 and 2022 (37.9%) and the first in Spain in terms of these kinds of operations per inhabitant.

Concerning the offer of commercial or regulated tourist accommodation, in 2022, there were almost 70 000 hotel beds in the study area, 92% of the provincial supply. In this respect, a single destination, Benidorm, represents nearly 60% of the province's total. However, between 2008 and 2022, there has been a trend towards a greater apartment specialisation. The number of apartment beds increased by 217.7% according to the regional government tourism agency, which for 2022 estimated the number of tourist apartments at 275 838, a figure much higher than that estimated by the Spanish National Institute of Statistics but which also offers a growing evolution since 2015 (Figure 6). Furthermore, tourist apartments in the study area represent almost 82% of the provincial total, becoming the main regulated commercial accommodation supply. The regularisation process of illegal beds seeking to be listed on the wrongly named sharing economy platforms may explain this trend since these distribution channels emerged in the Spanish tourism market in the last decade and were unaffected by the crisis between 2008 and 2014.

In this regard, the process was influenced by Law 4/2013, on measures to make the housing rental market more flexible and promote it, which indicates that the rental of housing with tourist or leisure fines was subject to the regulation of the regional governments. That national law led to the approval of Law 15/2018 on tourism, leisure, and hospitality in the Valencia Region. This law obliges these properties to be registered as tourist accommodation establishments and to have a certificate of compatibility as tourist accommodation issued by the local councils.

Figure 6. Evolution of the average regulated tourist accommodation offer and overnight stays in the Alicante coastline (2007-2022)



Source: Spanish National Institute of Statistics, 2023. Data refers to the Costa Blanca tourist spot

In some cases, it may be observed that the large stock of empty housing that became vacant after the crisis has become tourist accommodation. Two-thirds of the territorial agents interviewed, mainly public administration and some territorial planning experts, associate the evolution of the property market with the emergence of digital tourist accommodation platforms such as Booking or Airbnb. In some local councils of the coastal towns, this has led to the elaboration of diagnostic studies that quantify and locate the tourist rental properties, aiming to improve decision-making and limit the growth of tourism accommodation.

After the impact of the COVID-19 crisis, tourism has recovered, and the number of overnight stays in hotels and apartments in 2022 is close to the record figures recorded in the five years 2015-2019. However, this recovery will not be complete until 2023. According to the data provided by the INE in 2022, on the Alicante coast, 15.4 million overnight stays were recorded in hotels, as opposed to the more than 17 million recorded between 2015 and 2019 (INE, 2022b). In the case of apartments, in 2022, 7.17 million overnight stays were recorded, exceeding the years preceding the pandemic. Although some stakeholders defend that there has been a change in the tourism model towards a more sustainable one that focuses on enhancing the value of the territory and the deseasonalization of demand, most indicate that this change has been proposed only theoretically. After COVID-19 there has not been a change in the tourist and urban policies, which continues to

focus on the real-estate growth, the model of sun and beach, and the increase in the supply of tourist homes.

## 4 Discussion

An analysis of the evolution of territorial and urban planning can explain the significant transformation that has taken place on the Spanish coast in recent decades, particularly in Alicante. Neither the approval of the Valencian Territorial Strategy (2011) nor the most recent regulatory legislation about urban development, territorial and landscape planning (Legislative Decree 1/2021) have been able to contain the latest stage of construction of new residential complexes in the coastal and pre-coastal municipalities. Other recent research has identified some factors that explain the delay and limitations of territorial planning development on the Spanish Mediterranean coast (Blázquez-Salom et al., 2019). The Valencian Territorial Strategy plays a prominent role as a regulatory document that considers carrying capacity in the urban expansion of municipalities, just as in other regions of the Spanish Mediterranean where urban and tourist pressure represents a challenge for territorial sustainability (Roig i Munar, 2013). However, over a decade of application of the Valencian Territorial Strategy (2011-2023), there has been intense pressure to modify the index of maximum land occupation that limits residential growth by the real estate sector on the coast (Olcina & Vera, 2023). Expressly, some stakeholders in the business sector point out the need to reform the Territorial Strategy since:

It proposes rigid growth models (...) that are not capable of adapting (...) to the singularities or specificities of the territory, nor do they link demographic growth to the plan's capacity to generate economic activity (...), which conditions the transformative power of the urbanism (...). Business sector.

In this sense, some municipalities are reluctant or face serious difficulties approving urban plans adapted to environmental sustainability and climate change adaptation as they limit their growth prospects. The challenges and conflicts arising in the definitive approval process prevent the development of municipal plans adapted to new territorial regulations that go against this guiding principle. In this way, most of the existing urban plans approved before the Valencian Territorial Strategy question the objectives of a necessary sustainable territorial development. This is explained by the context in which they were designed when growth-oriented land and territorial planning prevailed, as the Regulatory Law of Urban Development case lasted between 1994 and 2006 in the Valencian Community. The weaknesses of the planning process in the Region of Valencia since 2000 include the poor development of planning on a subregional and metropolitan scale, which

are ideal scales for territorial planning as they establish a link between the Territorial Strategy and the municipal urban development plans. Therefore, this situation has led municipalities to have a pre-eminent role as transforming agents of the territory, especially in coastal areas, where the real estate market constitutes the primary source of income and employment creation. According to Blázquez et al. (2015), this relevance fosters the development of tourism activity from a neo-liberal perspective and the reduction of the state's role. This economic importance explains the obsolescence of the planning documents on a municipal level in most of the study area. The establishment of limits to urban-tourist growth through the incorporation of regulations that seek to ensure the sustainability principles and, recently, climate change adaptation explains, on the one hand, the reluctance of the local governments to approve new general structural plans as they consider that they could condition their future development. On the other hand, it helps to understand the conflicts and tension generated during their processing and approval by the different groups (such as urban developers or political parties) who consider that they restrict the business and growth possibilities. This process is also evident when we analyse the prevention of natural risks in urban planning policies (Olcina et al., 2018).

In most cases, there has been a return to the pre-pandemic conditions characterised by the continuous growth of the activity, embodied in the increase of the number of tourist-residential properties or the existing hotel capacity, following the logic of the Fordist model either by maintaining the extensive, resource-guzzling, territorial model or by returning to an intensive territorial exploitation model which densifies an already saturated space. Nevertheless, the growth of real estate and tourism activity in the province since 2012, reactivated after the COVID-19 pandemic, showed significant differences compared to the developed until 2008, during the so-called "real estate tsunami". One of them is the magnitude. The sale of new housing represents around 13% of the total operations, as opposed to 40% of the period 2000-2007 and more than 50% in the crisis period of 2008-2013. Newly constructed properties are much lower than the figures of this century's first seven and a half years (18 790 permits in 2007 in the study area as opposed to 4 651 in 2022). However, in 2022 and the first quarter of 2023, all the recently constructed properties have been absorbed, and the accumulated stock has reduced. Another difference is related to the profile of the buyer. The attractiveness of the Costa Blanca has been reinforced for foreign buyers who wish to purchase a second residence and foreign capital towards real estate investment. As in the cases of other Spanish coastal tourist destinations, different types of institutional investors, investment funds, transnational capital, and Real Estate Investment Trusts have entered the province of Alicante (Méndez, 2022). Part of this capital is directed towards

selling and renting tourist properties, both complete blocks and single-family homes, usually in the luxury segment, and apartments. This was also a feature of the real estate bubble at the beginning of the twenty-first century, but the current phase has unique characteristics.

While during the final phase of the speculative property bubble and the crisis (2007-2008), foreign demand represented around 16% of the total operations, during the post-Covid years, 2021 and 2022, it has increased to 30 and 37%, respectively, according to data of the Ministry of Transport, Mobility and Urban Agenda (2023). Other sources, such as the Official College of Property and Mercantile Registrars, indicate a figure of 41.75% for the year 2022. Part of these real estate dynamics are most likely related to the proliferation and profitability of regulated tourism properties, whether in blocks and apartment complexes or houses in coastal spaces such as the area of study (Ardura et al., 2019), but also in other types of tourism on a national or international level (Ferreri & Sanyal, 2018; Chamusca et al., 2019; Cerdá-Mansilla et al., 2022). This type of supply has been regulated over the last few years (regional Law 15/2018 and Decree 10/2021) and has led to the emergence of a significant volume of tourist offer that had been operating illegally (Guttentag, 2015; Aguado-Moralejo et al., 2021). Indeed, four of the ten Spanish municipalities with the highest number of tourist properties that are not provincial capitals are in the study area (INE, 2023 b). The impact of the 2008 crisis on the production processes and the restructuring of the tourism spaces, associated with the subsequent recovery of the upward trend, can be seen in other coastal areas of the Spanish Mediterranean coast, such as the Balearic Islands (Pons et al., 2014; Murray et al., 2017). This trend has been even more pronounced in most monofunctional tourist destinations after the significant impact of COVID-19 (Gössling et al., 2020; Sheller, 2020).

Nevertheless, despite general urban and tourist dynamics, our results reveal that the territorial planning actions have not been uniform along Alicante's coastal and pre-coastal areas. Some municipalities have committed to containing growth aligned with sustainability and climate change adaptation policies as a guiding principle in their urban-tourism actions, as observed in other autonomous regions (López & Ribas, 2023). As an alternative to real estate growth, some stakeholders consider that the indications of the territorial planning instruments can constitute an incentive to promote and prioritise urban regeneration, reform, and rehabilitation to reclassify and modernise residential tourist destinations as a tool to drive territorial development and cohesion. In this respect, it could solve several problems of obsolescence and degradation suffered by tourist destinations dominated by expansive dynamics, low density, and energetically inefficient models with aging real estate and facilities shortages. In this respect, the 2008 crisis and the pandemic have led to a change in some councils' social and cultural mentality concerning tourism



development policies, with the search for a sustainable model and a strategy of differentiation based on proximity products and the deseasonalising of tourism. A few public administrations seek to foster a model based on a tourist experience related to the territory and the local culture and the aspects associated with the management of the tourism activity that was adopted during the pandemic, such as the reduction of venue capacities, which have been incorporated into some local tourism policies. However, these new models of tourism development have not been able to counteract the dynamics and inertia of the sector's development since the most significant change in 2008-2023 has been the upward trend in tourist accommodation offer and the regulation of residential tourism.

## 5 Conclusions

In the Valencian Community, between 2008 and 2022, a paradigm shift in territorial planning emerged following the approval of the Valencian Territorial Strategy in 2011, emphasizing the imperative to foster sustainable territorial development. Noteworthy recent best practices have been identified at the regional level, such as the PATIVEL, at the subregional level, as the Territorial Action Plan (PAT) of the Vega Baja, or at the local level, as reflected by the Denia General Structural Plan. However, at the local level on the Alicante coast, land transformation processes have continued, and, in most cases, previous municipal urban plans have not been adapted to the new territorial planning guidelines. This is attributed to the technical complexity of approving and processing the urban plans and the need for coordination and collaboration between different public administrations, which in many cases is hindered by the absence of political stability and agreements between political groups. In this context, some stakeholders engaged in the design and approval of these new urban plans emphasize the need to streamline the approval procedures for new territorial and urban planning or at least modify the mechanisms by which administrative or procedural shortcomings in plan approval can either stall or annul the plan entirely, such as the case of El Campello in 2016. This is suggested to balance the pace of changes and evolving territorial needs with the planning documents guiding sustainable territorial development. Likewise, often, the relationships of mutual interest and those established between entrepreneurs of the real estate sector and the local political elite classes hinder updating the urban planning policy to align it with the territorial planning policies applied by the regional government (Huete & Mantecón, 2021).

Consequently, only two out of the 32 analyzed municipalities have managed, albeit with difficulties, to complete the adaptation process of their general urban development plans to meet the

requirements of regional territorial and land use planning. Hence, the growth dynamics during the economic recession phase have not been reversed or reconverted, although the figures do not reach those recorded in the years of the real estate boom. This re-growth dynamic, widespread on the Alicante coast, includes a partial recovery of the construction sector and, notably, the growth in the second-hand housing market and regulated tourist establishments. Likewise, during this period, the buyer's profile has changed slightly, with a growth in the importance of foreign capital in revitalizing the current housing market, as occurs in other destinations on the Spanish coast. However, the most prominent role in the deceleration and subsequent recovery of the transforming dynamics has been played by the dynamics of interest rates and the granting of mortgages more than the provisions in territorial planning documents. Thus, territorial planning has not yet succeeded in altering urban-touristic dynamics. However, according to the perceptions of interviewed stakeholders, the potential impact of the new guidelines on future developments has not been ruled out.

Future lines of research can be opened on this topic related to the different political responses to sustainable territorial planning, the recent movements of the real estate market based on the tension generated by global financial corporations and the effects of the current global warming process manifested in the geographical space. The continuation of the analysis of the Real Estate Investment Trusts' impact on these mature tourism models constitutes another line of future research to be developed. Furthermore, conducting qualitative research with local stakeholders to evaluate the problems related to updating territorial planning locally is another field of study that should be expanded. We recognize the lack of representativeness of the sample analyzed in our research. Still, we also point out that, in part, it reflects the lack of interest of many local public administrations and private sector representatives in developing effective territorial planning that promotes sustainable development.

Territorial planning will face critical challenges in the coming years. It should become a more relevant political instrument for developing environmentally sustainable actions and climate change adaptation. Adopting a shift in territorial planning policies is necessary to achieve these objectives locally. Land use planning resolutions and measures should anticipate market mechanisms to be effective and resolve societal problems. This issue is complex but necessary in Mediterranean tourist areas, which are globalised, with accelerated socio-economic dynamics and low territorial culture and subject to severe and intense environmental changes due to climate change. The necessary harmonisation of territorial planning on a local scale with the Valencian Territorial Strategy and other sectoral and comprehensive territorial planning instruments will be an essential

requirement to redirect the territorial model on the coast of Alicante, only then enabling an effective change in tourism policy.

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