

INTERPRETATION CENTERS AS LOCAL TOURISTIC DEVELOPMENT ENGINES: A FAILED MODEL? THE CASE OF THE PROVINCE OF CÁDIZ

Manuel Arcila Garrido

José Antonio López Sánchez

Departamento de Historia, Geografía y Filosofía. Universidad de Cádiz

joseantonio.lopez@uca.es

manuel.arcila@uca.es

I. INTRODUCTION

So far these years, there has been an intense creative process of the touristic offer associated with the value of the natural and cultural heritage in the form of interpretation centres. This process has been favoured by certain circumstances which made easier both the construction of equipments for this end and the recent tendency to local development which have contributed to natural and cultural resources. Thus a great number of similar interpretation centres have arisen searching for the promotion of a specific knowledge on the different aspects of the zones where they are placed, and enlarging the touristic offer as real engines of the economical development of the zone.

This text will analyze interpretation centres in the municipalities of the province of Cádiz. We formulate the hypothesis –for these touristic offer in the province– out from the coexistence of these centres and the necessity of changing their planning and managing both from the territorial and the social and commercial points of view.

II. THE CONCEPT OF INTERPRETATION CENTRES: A DEFINITION ATTEMPT

The use of this concept is relatively new. There are no general rules which define or classify this type of centres (Martín Piñol, 2011). As a matter of fact, different terms are used in various cases to name the same thing, as Martín Piñol (2011) points out, they are «a mix between conventional museums and cultural equipments inspired in the American concept of *visitor's centers*». This author even introduces a new term which includes all these equipments: *paramuseums* (Martín Piñol, 2011).

In a nutshell, from a conciliatory point of view, we think that interpretation centers could be defined as:

«public or private equipments which aim to interpret, make aware and broadcast a specific heritage issue, as defined from a comprehensive point of view, which could also include natural, historical, cultural and ethnical aspects. These centres should have a monographic theme introduced from a geographical and cultural point of view in a conciliatory way. They should also be placed in the same geographical context where the interpreted heritage item belongs. As a matter of fact, the same interpretative space could serve touristically to promote the geographical place where it is framed and promote itself through local products (merchandising, gastronomic, etc.)».

III. INTERPRETATION CENTRES IN THE PROVINCE OF CADIZ

History is the main theme among the centres submitted to analysis representing more than the 36%, followed by those associated with nature (25%). In the province of Cadiz, centres devoted to gastronomy are outstanding which represent the double regarding the average value in Spain.

From the obtained data in the interviews and polls between June 2011 and november 2012, it is noticeable that only the 67,9 % of the centres are open, whereas the rest are closed to visitors, being repaired or waiting for opening date. This data is lower to that presented by Martín Piñol for the rest of Spain which rises up to 79, 6 %. Among the closed centres in the province of Cadiz, the 42, 3 % are devoted to history and only the 3,8 % are associated with gastronomy.

When analyzing the age of interpretation centres in Cádiz, we noticed that most of them have been opened recently. More of the 60 % were opened after 2006, being the year 2010 outstanding, when in the height of the economic crisis, 10 new centres were opened. It is significant that the 13 % of the opened centres after 2006 are closed today, waiting for opening date or being repaired. It is also outstanding as well that only the 21% of the centres were opened before 2000. This data confirm the excessive creation of these centres so far the 21st century, a tendency which could almost be regarded as disproportionate, if we bear in mind the great economic support operated from offices and institutions for their creation and the achievements for the population of the places where they function (closed centres, few social visibility, small visitors number, etc.)

IV. TOURISTIC DEMAND OF THE INTERPRETATION CENTRES

The analysed interpretation centres reached the highest number of visitors in 2009, with almost 436.000 people, thanks to the increasing number of cultural users and specially to the archaeological interest of Baelo Claudia. We can notice differences between those centres associated with culture and those devoted to nature. Those centres focused on culture maintain a growing tendency from 2001 to 2009, when that tendency changes. In the case of the centres focused on nature the falling tendency is a constant from 2001 to 2009, and

changed from 165.000 visitors to a little more than 113.000 in 2010. In both cases this evolution takes place in the same space, Baelo Claudia in Tarifa and the Ice Factory in Sanlúcar de Barrameda respectively.

V. PERCEPTION ANALYSIS ON INTERPRETATION CENTERS

Finally, we get the results from the opinion polls made between June and September 2012. 262 opinion polls were made among students from different degrees and masters who had this topic in their studies at the University of Cadiz. 62,78% among those polled were female and the rest –37,22%– were men. The age of those polled was from 17 to 77 years old, being an average of 26. Most of those polled were from Cádiz 25%, the 15,2% from Jerez de la Frontera, the 8,5% from San Fernando and the 5,8% from Puerto Real.

One of the most significant facts could be the ignorance perceived about a basic conceptualization to define interpretation centres for the 70% of those polled. Otherwise, the 43,75% of those polled had visited in some occasion an equipment with these characteristics. Something to be emphasized would be the student's perception about interpretation centres. It is significant that the 47,3% of those polled associated interpretation centres with the public sector and only the 26,89% did it with the private sector. Only a small part of those polled (21,88%), associated interpretation centres with urban environment.

Lastly, according to those polled, there is an obvious relationship between tourism and interpretation centres. So a 41,97% of those polled think that one of the main functions for interpretation centers is tourism. Similarly, other of the confirmed opinions, as pointed before, is that interpretation centers are places to show objects with touristic purposes (according to the 44,2% of those polled).

VI. FINAL REMARKS

It is important to take on the double function of interpretation centers as cultural, ethnographic and natural values promoters of the territories and as touristic resources. Both functions have the aim of a sustainable development of the municipality.

That is the reason we have to change our mind about interpretation centres and think not only about the economic advantages, but also look at them as new cultural values for the territory. In the short term, interpretation centers in the province, and generally in Spain, should change to be able to offer different services (administration technical advice, heritage interpretation, tourism development, etc.). Eventually, those changes, will show an economic, social and cultural balance. Interpretation centers should be cultural and economic spaces combined to complement services such as coffee shops, hotels, rural houses, souvenir shops or transport. To get to this situation it is necessary to become aware of the cultural importance of the heritage and the territory, and that public politics should focus on this aim in the medium and long term, away from local and political opportunism.