

TOWN PLANNING, ECONOMY AND HEALTH: ALACANT'S HARBOUR, FROM A DEATH LAKE INTO A MODERN HARBOUR (1900-1914)

Salvador Salort i Vives

Economic Applied Analysis Department
University of Alicante

Alacant's city council started its transformation from a classical liberal city into a welfare liberal one at the end of the 19th century. During this period it left the old passivity behind to start a process of modernity. A modernity that would finally cut back the mortality, in a frame of demographic, epidemiologic and health risks transition, amongst others.

The municipal influence on the hygiene and healthiness has been pointed out by several authors, and they all agree about their beneficial effects. In fact, it was really important in the United Kingdom at the end of the 19th century. In Spain, generally, and in the País Valencià particularly, the measures taken by the local governments regarding public health came later. Certainly, the Spanish towns did not have the same fiscal autonomy the British ones used to have. That could explain the difference in time. Alacant's case is a good evidence of that statement, as it could be seen later on.

Till the Liberal Revolution about the middle of the 19th century, the absolutist city councils did not much in public health issues. Basically, they just tried to fight against epidemic onslaughts, by establishing quarantine and sanitary cordons. The private institutions, maybe with a municipal subsidy, were the ones to offer refuge to the people. But the local corporation had little interest in the health infrastructures. With the access of the bourgeoisie to the political decision centres, the previous tendency changed slightly. In the second part of the 19th century, the city council started a more involved policy in hygiene and healthiness issues. The results of that policy were the cleaning-up and reparation of some streets; a bigger concern about the sewer system, markets and slaughterhouses; some attempts to supply water; provision of street lighting, first with oil then with gas; a better education; a bigger interest in having doctors and midwives; and better conditions for draughtsmen and architects in the new town planning context.

The local measures went in two directions: Law and investment. As regards the former, new Municipal By-Laws, Regulations and Edicts were published. The obsolete 1850 Municipal By-Laws were substituted in 1898. Almost all the new ones were related to hygiene

and public health: supervision, house building, maintenance of public buildings and road network, control of industries and shops, activities related to the purchase and sale of food, and the burials. On the other hand, several Regulations were enacted: for the *Casa de Socorro* (Institution where first aid was given) and its medical and pharmaceutical assistance; for the Local Chemical Laboratory and its price lists (it had a favourable effect on the food quality control); for the hospitality; for the market service; for the slaughter's organisation; for the local Charity, for the building of toilets and waste pipes; for the Regulations passed in 1914 regarding hygiene and healthiness, for the Basic Regulations of the Hygiene Institute and the Local Laboratory of Alicante and its province; and for the price list for analyses done at the Hygiene Institute. Finally, Edicts related to the hygiene and healthiness continued to be published, especially as regards the vaccination against the chickenpox. The people were reluctant to it, because in some cases the lymph was in bad conditions and the consequences could be very bad.

As regards the investments, the municipal policies, in the new town planning context, aimed to give better public services to the citizens. Thus, some actions, as the following ones, were carried out: the city walls were pulled down, and three new esplanades were built, so the city had a better access to the sea. Several public parks were also opened. The enlargement of the city started in 1896. Some districts could not be included in the *Plan de Ensanche* (enlargement project), because of its real limitations. Anyway, they were built according to the hygiene principles. During the first two decades of the 20th century, several reforms continued to be done. The streets and squares were also arranged and new roads were opened. Nevertheless, some districts in the north of the city were crowded and unhealthy.

As far as some of the essential public services, Alicante had a more regular water supply from 1898, thanks to the contract signed by the City Council and the Belgian *Compagnie Générale des Conduits d'Eaux*. The public lighting became better by involving more companies.

One of the most important actions, both from the town planning point of view and from that of the citizens' health was the cleaning-up of the harbour, its services and influence area, and also of the sewage water and rain evacuation system, which was practically *ex novo*. Both elements were highly related. If the latter worked efficiently, the former would maintain its state.

The harbour was the State responsibility, but the public sewer system depended on the City Council. Thus, both because of the responsibilities conflict between the two Administration levels and because of the high costs of the project, both institutions paid them. The '*Proyecto de Saneamiento del Puerto de Alicante y de su zona de servicio*', written in 1905 by the engineer and the harbour director, Ramón Montagut, was very important in this process.

He pointed out the deficiencies of the harbour installations as well as its service area: it lacked for draught and its docks were thin and insufficient. He also emphasized the evil consequences for hygiene and health of throwing the sewage water and rain into the harbour. His following words are related to this:

'According to the demographic statistics, the present mortality in Alicante reaches the 28.55 per 1,000. Even if this quantity is not alarming in comparison to many Spanish inland capitals, there is a big difference with those cities with

perfect sewer systems. Thanks to the *Saneamiento* works, together with a rigorous hygiene that the City Council and the *Junta de Sanidad* (Health Committee) must impose, the mortality in Alicante will probably drop to 20 per 1,000. Thus, considering that there are more or less 50,000 inhabitants in this city, 425 people per year won't die. This fact is sufficiently eloquent to make the people realize of these works' importance. When the water was first brought to Alicante twelve years ago (in 1898), the first steps to solve the *Saneamiento* problem were done. This improvement was essential, even if the problem was partially solved. The city had arterial blood to feed itself, but it didn't have veins to expel the waste from its huge body. So the system was incomplete. So the *Saneamiento* works will give *veins* (italics in the original text) to Alicante. That is what the sewer system represents.

Montagut's project, as regards the cleaning-up of the harbour and part of its service area, was carried out between 1908 and 1914. The Works Ministry and the *Junta de Obras del Puerto de Alicante* paid the costs.

Nevertheless, the sewer system, that was supposed to be financed by the City Council, was only partially done, due to the municipal lack of funds. The local government did not have less political interest in doing the works than the central Government, but it lacked fiscal autonomy. In other words, the Spanish municipal *Hacienda* (finances) have been historically, and still nowadays, subordinated to other levels of the public Administration, central government and autonomic governments.

Anyway, the cleaning-up of the harbour and its service area as well as the city enlargement were important for the city's hygiene and also to achieve a considerably better public health. The following data prove the reduction in mortality Montagut pointed out (though it is obviously not only related to the harbour modernisation). The mortality rates drop in Alacant from 26,4 per 1,000 in 1900 to 18,7 per 1,000 in 1930. Almost an eight points recession. The second most important harbour in Valencia was no more a death lake, as the hygiene experts used to say during the 19th century.

Nevertheless, the little municipal attention paid on the sewer system supposed a dead weight. The process to overcome it started in the twenties and was slow and difficult.

