

THE SOCIAL SPACE OF TORREVIEJA WITHIN THE VALENCIAN GEODEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

Ernesto Cutillas Orgilés

Departamento de Geografía Humana. Universidad de Alicante

Recent decades have seen a series of changes in the nature and evolution of the geographic distribution of the population and housing in the Region of Valencia, including the delimitation of the most dynamic areas, compared with areas that have experienced more moderate growth. The metropolitan areas and coastal municipalities that specialise in tourism and residential property development are the most dynamic in the region, in contrast with inland areas with economies that are traditionally industrial or agricultural in nature, and where current restructuring processes affecting economic activity are resulting in an increasing decline in local systems of production, and difficulties in adapting to the global economy.

The dynamic development of coastal and metropolitan areas has now transferred to the property market, where in recent years appreciation has led to increases in the average value of homes, particularly in the province of Alicante. Despite this situation, the pace of growth in the construction of new homes has continued to rise, albeit with a recent deceleration in both property development and the sale and purchase of homes. This trend could pose a serious threat to towns like Torrevieja, where the model of growth is based on the development of residential properties. Of the most heavily populated towns in the Region of Valencia, censuses in Torrevieja have recorded the greatest increases in population since 1981. Indeed, for the census periods 1981-1991 and 1991-2001, the number of inhabitants in Torrevieja doubled each time, a trend which has continued for the 2001-2007 period, influenced by the arrival of foreign nationals and the dynamic growth of neighbouring towns. In absolute figures, this means 94,006 registered inhabitants in 2007, making it the fifth largest agglomeration in the Region of Valencia by number of inhabitants.

The recent evolution of urban land occupation in Torrevieja is the result of a series of mutations caused by tourism, a fact which is also true for the neighbouring towns which not only share municipal boundaries and intense functional relations with Torrevieja, they also have a common agricultural past, linked to the traditional irrigated farming systems found in the low plains of the River Segura. In this regard, it should be noted that until well into the twentieth century Torrevieja remained on the margins of the growth and development experienced by the major industrial towns and tourist resorts in the Region of Valencia. It was mainly from the 1990s onwards when the territory and society of Torrevieja began to expe-

rience the most profound changes to date, as this period was the starting point for an urban model which, despite having emerged years previously, features residential development as the basic unit of spatial growth. During this decade the consolidated part of the town hardly expanded at all, whereas housing developments grew like never before. By the end of the twentieth century, Torrevieja's discontinuous urban fabric was growing steadily, resulting in a somewhat vague town model which, extending beyond municipal and district boundaries, began to spread like an oil slick over the surrounding territory.

Since 1981 Torrevieja has the highest recorded population growth in the Region of Valencia. But the most notable feature is the number of residential properties, the third largest in the region, with 139,064 homes in 2005. From the 1990s onwards this dynamic growth can be explained by the arrival of foreign nationals (particularly from the UK) and the processes of residential tourism, the growth of which is currently slowing, as is construction work and the sale and purchase of homes. Most of the foreigners are from Western European countries, and the main nationalities have a sociodemographic profile of residential retired people. Of this group, the most notable feature is the higher number of males as age increases, in contrast with a more balanced population structure when considering the total population. There is also another group of immigrants, from Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia, whose main purpose for coming to the area is to find work, and for this reason their main sociodemographic characteristics are youth and activity.

Another notable feature of the foreign population registered in Torrevieja (which can equally be applied to other coastal areas in Spain with large communities of retired foreign nationals) is their degree of segregation by nationality and of exposure between the different communities that make up the town. Despite the fact that between 2004 and 2007 there was a decrease in the segregation index for all foreigners, it should be noted that the most numerous collective, the British, tend to be more isolated, a fact that is also true when examining the dissimilarity index by nationality, where European residential retired foreigners tend to share the territory between them more easily. However, for other nationalities it is less frequent to share space with these communities.

The delimitation of characteristics relating to life cycle and socioeconomic status of the population of Torrevieja was performed by factorial analysis of the variables with greatest correlation. The basis of the study is the Population and Homes Census of 2001, as the most detailed source for statistical information. The results are disparate and should be considered with caution and as indicators of general trends. Firstly, this type of analysis is normally performed on average towns with a relatively diversified economic base. Secondly, increases in population and the number of homes in the town between 2001 and 2007 were not included in the study. Thirdly, and most importantly, it does not record the «linked population» – people who live in another town but own a second home in Torrevieja, or work or study there. This linked population forms part of the social space of the town, either on a daily or seasonal basis, and will no doubt have increased considerably since the last census. Even so, an analysis of the most important factors shows the large concentration and dependency (in terms of mobility) of the foreign population on the residential complexes in the urban periphery, in contrast to a town centre made up of Spanish and younger foreign residents who, unlike what often occurs in other towns, are more dynamic in terms of their life cycle. The largest numbers and proportion of foreign populations are therefore located on the edges

of the town, and when considering the high average age of these communities (55.5 years among Western Europeans in 2006), the relationship between retired foreign nationals and residential property development is clear; whereas, the nearer homes are to the «pre-tourist» town, the more heterogeneous the foreign population becomes.

These trends, observed by analysing quantitative information, are still a mere abstraction of a more complex reality, which should also be approached by considering the relationships of proximity with neighbouring towns and using qualitative techniques. In this way a series of dimensions could be considered from another angle (mainly in the social study of the population), such as the degree of evenness, isolation and exposure of the various communities, the physical concentration of the population, or the ability to access services in the town.

