PRIVATISATION OF PUBLIC SPACE UNDER THE PRETEXT OF TOURISM MANAGEMENT

Posted on 21/03/2024 by Naider

In the last few weeks Seville has been the talk of the town after the newspaper ABC announced the intention of the city council **to close the Plaza de España to free access and charge admission to tourists**. According to the proposal, access would continue to be free for those registered and/or born in the city, and the income generated by the fee would be used for maintenance, security and conservation of the monuments.

This news has caused a stir on social networks and in the media and has triggered a series of debates related, on the one hand, to the **privatisation of public space**, and, on the other hand, to the current mediocre **management of tourism**.

Figure 1. Plaza de España (Seville)
Photo: Tânia Mousinho, Unsplash

The truth is that, although in principle the residents of Seville would not be affected by the charge of the fee, the enclosure of this public space would already imply its privatisation, since access would no longer be free. **From the moment a barrier is placed in a public space**, even if it is only physical and does not imply a prohibition of access, **this space loses its use as an everyday space that can be accessed spontaneously, improvised and without formalities**.

In this way, the collective perception of the Plaza de España as a *square* is blurred, coming to be perceived as an *open-air museum* or a **transitory space for visitors rather than as a place to spend time**.

This situation is reminiscent of Barcelona's **Park Güell**, which began regulating access to the park in 2013, charging admission to tourists and maintaining free access for citizens by prior reservation. In 2020 the park launched a new management model "with the aim of facilitating the reunion of the city with the park". This model establishes **two time slots for access**, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon, **exclusively for residents** of the neighbourhoods adjacent to the park and for those registered in the Gaudir Més programme. During these time slots, **tourist visits are not allowed**, thus allowing the local community to enjoy the park.

Figure 2. Scheme of accesses to Park Güell
Source: El Park Güell y la ciudadanía

Other widespread models for controlling visitor flows in order to preserve and maintain urban tourist sites include the **system of free reservations** and the **system of time-based visitation**, adopted, among others, by the Acropolis of Athens.

On a larger scale, many European cities have, for years, opted to implement a **tourist tax** or city entrance fee. In Spain, this tourist tax is only applied in Catalonia (since 2012) and in the Balearic Islands (since 2016, although it was previously in force between 2002 and 2003).

The tourist tax has not proven to reduce tourist inflows, at least in Spain, but it was not conceived for that purpose either. What it does do is to generate revenue for local governments not only for taxation but also for compensation. **The question is whether these funds should be used to encourage and promote tourism** and improve the visiting experience of tourists, **or to alleviate the harmful consequences of tourist exploitation** and preserve the most affected neighbourhoods and areas.

In the specific case of Seville, if the only objective of the enclosure of the Plaza de España is to raise money to ensure the conservation and maintenance of the site, it seems more appropriate **to implement a municipal tourist tax that does not directly affect the public space itself or the local people**.

Even so, **neither charging a fee for access to a tourist site nor the implementation of a tourist tax is a guarantee of more sustainable tourism, less overcrowded and more respectful** of the environment and the quality of life of local people. To this end, public administrations must establish a tourism management model that prioritises the protection of the quality of life of local people and the preservation of tourist sites, while at the same time promoting a local economy and the creation of quality tourism-related jobs.

Main picture: Dim Hou in Unsplash