

## **Altea Urban Project: An academic approach to the transformation of a coastal Spanish touristic city based on the improvement of the public space**

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**Abstract.** *The town of Altea (Alicante, Spain) has an important urban center that has historically been characterized by two contrasting situations: on one hand, the settlements located on the seaside elevations (Bellaguarda and the Renaissance Bastion) linked to the agricultural uses of the fertile valleys of the rivers Algar and els Arcs, and on the other hand the coastal developments, originally fishery, but nowadays with touristic uses on the maritime front. All these elements configure an urban nucleus that, due to its urban, architectural and landscape qualities, gives rise to one of the main tourist attractions of the region. However, the area described nowadays presents an important problem related to the use and habitability of public space, which is invaded by the presence of the private vehicle, even along the seaside, due to its touristic relevance. This article presents the results of an academic experience developed to study different possibilities of urban transformations for the municipality of Altea, taking as a project site the urban vacuum still conserved between the two situations previously described: the historical areas on the coastal elevations (Dalt) and new urban developments parallel to the seaside (Baix). This academic activity, performed by nearly 50 students from the University of Alicante, was developed in the context of the design course Urbanism 5 during the academic year 2015-16, thanks to the agreement signed between the Municipality of Altea and the University of Alicante.*

*Keywords: Public space, historical urban evolution, tourism phenomena, urbanistic project, educational experience*

### **Introduction**

Defining a new design course is something quite similar to an everyday action. In both cases we apply to a specific case a set of motivations and previously acquired criteria to take the precise decisions that will lead us to some expected results. Thus our experience is a powerful tool, not only to perceive reality, but also to alter it by projecting on it. Urbanism 5 is one of the last courses of the educational itinerary of urbanism in the degree of Architecture at the University of Alicante.

After diverse courses that approach the formation of the student around certain subjects

(such as the rudiments of the discipline, the ecological urbanism, knowledge on residential developments or tools for landscape analysis), students reach a level in which they are expected to be able to develop a projective activity on the existing reality with a certain autonomy. It is therefore a question of applying the experience gained previously to a specific site in order to establish a series of objectives to be achieved. The work performed by the lecturers responsible of this design studio is to show them a panorama of contemporary urbanism capable of helping them to define successful planning strategies to achieve those targets proposed by themselves. This panorama is neither complete nor closed, but tries to

show the culture of the urbanistic project that they intend to develop (understood as a set of appropriate contemporary references). Joan Busquets and Felipe Correa identified X lines (2006) of the contemporary urban project, ten fields of work and ten ways to understand the projective activity of the discipline. The panorama to which we referred above is framed within these X lines, completing the theoretical context of the course.

The study case where to apply it during the academic course 2015-16 at the University of Alicante was the Filharmònica square, an urban vacuum present in the center of Altea -a coastal village in the Southeast of Spain- which configures a key public space to improve the urban quality of the historical quarter, but nowadays used as a huge parking lot. The city of Altea, like many other similar villages of the Spanish Levant, shows what can be called as a double location: on one hand the historical nucleus formed around the existing seaside elevations (Bellaguarda and the Renaissance Bastion). On the other the urban settlements linked to the marine activity: the original fishers quarter (Raval de Sant Pere) and the later linear developments along the national road N-332, related to the touristic activity. This brief description shows us two different parts of Altea -the city on the hills (Altea de Dalt) and the city linked to the seaside (Altea de Baix)- which are present in the collective imaginary of its inhabitants. And between one and the other a historical urban void (Figure 1) that nowadays is still present in the urban network due to the presence of the Filharmònica square (a plot obtained after the demolition of the municipal cinema) located in a strategically central area. The last condition, but the one which gives the location almost a territorial dimension, is the presence of the narrow-gauge railway line between Alicante and Denia crossing the village of Altea precisely through this urban vacuum, and through the Filharmònica Square. Due to the improvement actions carried out in the area by the public entity responsible of this railway line, a public debate started about what could happen in this key urban area in the near future, and this was the context in which a teaching agreement was signed in between the Municipality of Altea and the University of Alicante.



**Figure 1. Map of Altea, F. Coello y P. Madoz, 1859 modified by the authors**

As we have already mentioned, the Filharmònica Square (project site) despite of being an adequate working environment in itself, allowed the students to establish a whole series of urban and territorial relations that implied the whole urban nucleus of Altea. Thus the students, organized in working groups, had to extend and delimitate a bigger area where to develop their projective action, adjacent to the Square (strategic site). It was a question of answering the above mentioned relations, but also of showing how a project like that could have repercussion on the whole city. This two concepts –project site and strategic site- will be later described in detail in the Methodology section. As a result of the extended delimited areas (strategic sites) proposed by the students three different attitudes were identified that allowed to organize and classify the projects.

Firstly can be found those projects that operate on what was called the relations between the upper and the lower part of the city (de Dalt a Baix), that is to say on the improvement of the urban relations in between those different urban settlements thinking that the Filharmònica Square could be a key element in the route that lead from the church (previously the main tower of the Renaissance Bastion) located in the upper part of the city, to the maritime edge.

Secondly, those projects that recognize the value of the urban vacuum that remains between the upper and the lower part of the city. The starting point of these projects was that this empty space, present in the public image (Lynch, 1960) of the city of Altea for centuries, must remain as a meeting place for citizens. A place like this could endow the town with a lack that many of our Mediterranean cities suffer: a large public space, capable of organizing the relationships between facilities and green spaces on the basis of cycling or pedestrian routes. These student works, which operate following linear developments parallel to the coast, were grouped under the denomination Baix.

Lastly ni Dalt ni Baix, that is to say, those projects which although they operate mainly in the existing environment between the Filharmònica Square and the Renaissance Bastion, focus their interest in those urban voids -of diverse entity- that have remained vacant into the urban network over time, either because of its complicated orography or because of issues related to soil management. Activating this network of vacancies based on a specific programs was the target of these exercises.

Once established the fields of interest and the scope of work that extended the strict project site (Filharmònica Square) began a working process that lasted over four months. The result were 15 proposals in which can be identified actions on urban space, minimalist projects based on strategic actions, large-scale landscape proposals that cover the entire urban center or its seafront, urban projects that propose to complete the plot of the city in the surroundings of the Filharmònica Square, actions of revitalization of the historical center or great artifacts (Busquets and Correa, 2006) that endow the locality with the necessary facilities, not only for the occasional tourists, but for the citizens; In short, a panorama of contemporary urbanism for the city of Altea.

## Methodology

The academic course was developed by working in groups of 3 to 4 students in a

theoretical-practical format developing two parallel activities: on one hand the study of contemporary theories and urban developments, and on the other the development of a design project in a workshop format. Thus the final result of the course in 2015-16 was a teaching material capable of showing a vision of the contemporary practice of urbanism and at the same time a projective interpretation of this vision coming from the degree of Architecture at the University of Alicante for the specific case of Altea. In this paper, although it is fully addressed to show the results obtained in the workshop section, in order to fully describe the teaching method used, the theoretical section will be briefly described below.

As already mentioned, the objective of this theoretical activity was to build a proper frame of reference for the course. As a result of this, it was intended to create a teaching material that could show a selection of urban developments showing alternative ways of proceeding in the contemporary project in relation to the built (or not) environment in which they are located. This section comprised two parallel activities: firstly the reading, elaboration of an essay and later critical session in the classroom about a series of lectures selected by the faculty and secondly the construction of a panorama of contemporary urbanism, based on the critical study of a whole series of urban projects on the premises described by J. Busquets and F. Correa (2006) which are related to the projective actions to be developed in Altea.

As for the workshop, the projective action started from the first moment after a field trip to the locality, with the Exercise 0, in which each student had to propose his own map of Altea. It is usually accepted that maps are objective and univocal representations of reality, but it is precisely in the system of graphic conventions and in the selection of those aspects of reality that pretend to be represented where we find the subjectivity of the author. This is precisely the objective sought by this first “warm up” exercise carried out quickly (1 week): to show publicly those self-interests present in the students, from the conviction that it is precisely from the intersection between the physical, social and cultural reality of a community

and the cloud of interests of the author from where the future projective actions could be developed.

During the length of the workshop, different sub-deliveries were planned in which the students had to answer a series of questions in parallel to the development of their project:

- Define a strategic site. Therefore, each working group had to answer two main questions: Where? Showing an accurate delimitation of the proposed strategic site and Why? Explaining the reasons for establishing this delimitation. It is here where previous individual reflections developed in Exercise 0 find their *raison d'être*. This dual-purpose urban reflection finds a clear reference in the methodology developed by the organization of the European competition during the last decades which can be consulted, for example, in the catalog of the last edition (Rebois, 2014). Each of the cities interested in participating in the calls for this international architecture contest, must submit to the scientific committee of European two related urban areas, with different scales (one including a larger one) on which that locality requests the elaboration of different urban reflections by the architects participating in the competitions. This dual approach allows the different proposals presented not to be a mere architectural or urbanistic resolution of a small scale, which could be approached in context different to an international competition, including a more far-reaching urban reflection. Therefore, the lecturers in charge of this design course proposed to the students to assume a role similar to that of the municipal authorities proposing the double delimitation already commented.

Make a diagnosis in which problems and opportunities could be identified both in the project and strategic sites and its environment: What is happening currently?

Define the objectives to be achieved by the proposal and therefore a proposal program for the selected sites: What could happen in the future?

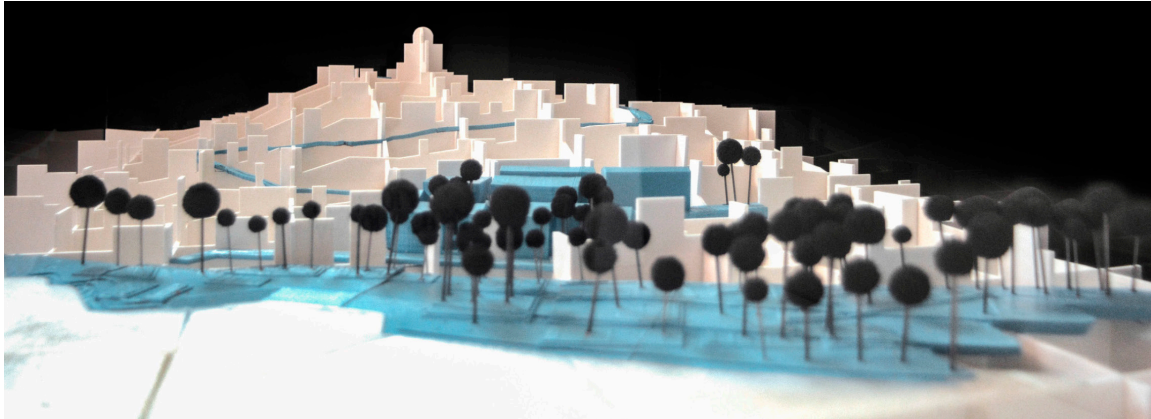
Finally, the students had to develop the necessary urban and architectural strategies to achieve the previously defined objectives: How? It is precisely here where the panorama of contemporary urbanism developed in parallel theoretical work took on a crucial importance.

## Measurement and analysis

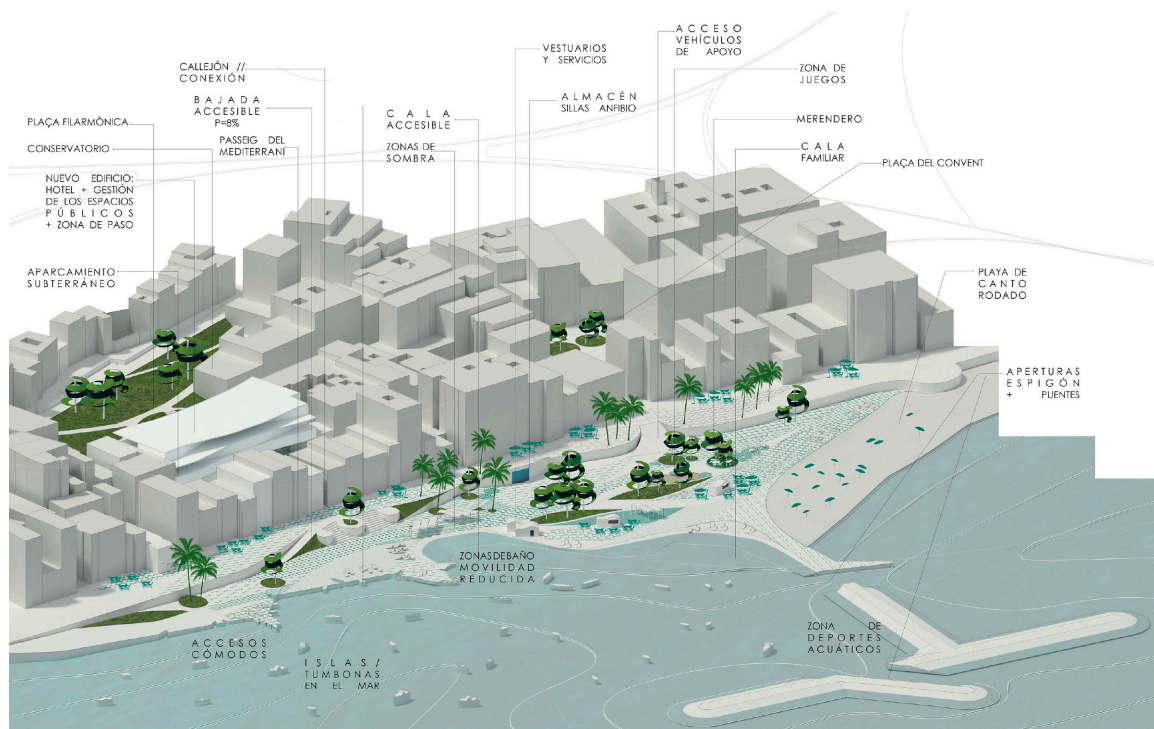
Now some of the urban strategies developed by the students will be briefly described grouping them on the basis of the three categories of strategic sites above commented.

Starting with those student works addressing the topic titled *de Dalt a Baix* now will be described two different approaches which build a kind of spatial continuity. On one side can be found the work performed by J. Martín, J.A. Ortega and R. Palencia (Figure 2) which develops an improvement on the existing urban conditions, specially focusing on the universal accessibility, in the way from the square located in the top of the Renaissance Bastion and the project site, selecting and transforming a series of existing streets that follow the level curves and nowadays presenting traffic transit on them. These new shared space route ends at the Filharmònica Square proposing a new urban project learning from the urban morphology present in the historical quarter. On the other side can be found the project performed by L. Birker, S. Ortega and C. Ortiz (Figure 3) which develops a connection between the project site and the sea front proposing to eliminate the traffic transit from the seaside and transforming an existing surface parking lot located in front of the seaside promenade which breaks the continuity of coastal uses in the Altea Bay. As a part of this transformation landscape project the students propose the creation of a new universal accessible beach after detecting the opportunity that this kind of touristic facility could be for the whole region.

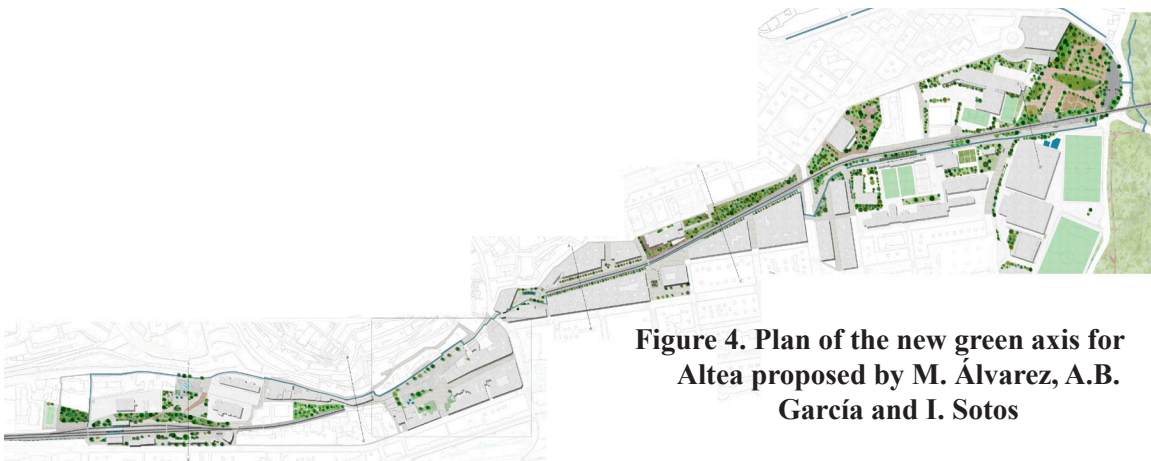
To conclude among the works developed in the category entitled *ni Dalt ni Baix* two proposals should be commented here: the projects performed by H. Ibáñez, C. Sala and J. M. Santo on the one side (Figure 5), and by A. M. Conejero, C. Ruíz and N. Sanjuan on the other (Figure 6), as both of them address the historical relation existing in between several artists during the XX century and the city of Altea, a relation that finally was consolidated with the foundation of the Fine Arts Faculty.



**Figure 2. Model of the connection between the Renaissance Bastion and the project site. J. Martín, J.A. Ortega and R. Palencia**



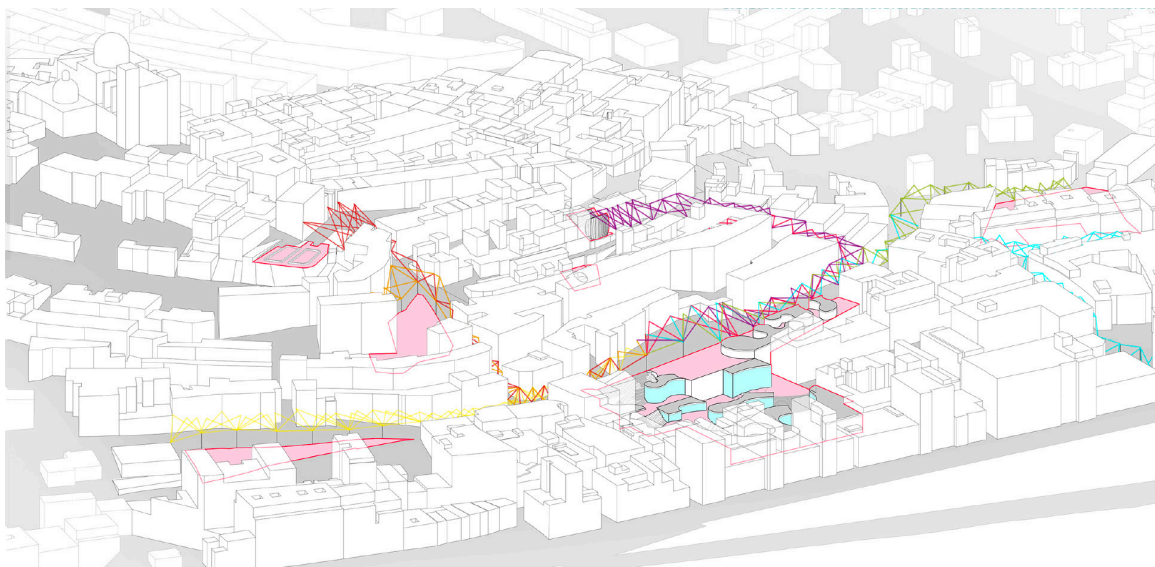
**Figure 3. Illustration of the new seafront promenade and beach by L. Birker, S. Ortega and C. Ortiz**



**Figure 4. Plan of the new green axis for Altea proposed by M. Álvarez, A.B. García and I. Sotos**



**Figure 5. Plan of the new housing and working facilities proposed in relation with the public space of Altea by H. Ibáñez, C. Sala and J. M. Santo**



**Figure 6. Axonometric view of the city center of Altea activated by the residence proposed by A. M. Conejero, C. Ruíz and N. Sanjuan**

These two projects propose the improvement of this relations after detecting both some debilities and opportunities. The first one proposes to create a network of small student apartments spotted among the different urban voids detected inside the urban network of the historical city, including the Filharmònica Square, in which actions on the public space are combined with housing, co-housing, working and co-working spaces, trying to visualize the plastic work performed by the Fine Arts students. The second one proposes the creation of an artist residence system taking these vacant spaces as the new locations for the artistic creation and for the public participation.

### Conclusion

During the development of the above mentioned design course at the University of Alicante two different levels of conclusions had been observed: the first one related to the physical urban reality observed in the study case selected, and the second one about the implemented educative tools developed during the course.

Firstly must be said that the initial intuitions about the key urban role that the Filharmònica Square should play in the near future of Altea have been confirmed after the working period. It could become the bigger public space – despite of the beach- of the whole village, and what is even more important, with a central location inside the historical quarter, areas that typically present a clear lack of these kind of spaces in the Mediterranean compact cities. In addition to this the improvement of the urban qualities were expanded to different parts of the city acquiring a possible repercussion for the whole city that should be further studied by the Municipality on the implementation of new urban initiatives in a multiple sense: improving the qualities of the public space, creating a new network of facilities, linking different parts of the urban center, developing a proper framework where to implement new social and cultural actions, or even when creating a regenerated seaside promenade.

Secondly the educative methodology proposed and implemented was successful in

obtaining two different targets: on the one hand creating a proper educative cultural framework where to develop the objectives fixed by the students after the theoretical approach, and on the other hand as an effective communication tool in between academicians, politicians and citizens. About the first target must be said that the ten lines defined by J. Busquets and F. Correa (2006) defined clearly the game field where the course should be developed and a range of possible references to help the students in the materialization of their work. Also, as has been mentioned above, the double approach to the location represented by the project site and the strategic site topics developed by European during the last decades has allowed the lecturers responsible of the design course to explain the students how an urbanistic project, that in a first sight could be seen as a local punctual action, could (and sometimes must) have a wider repercussion in the urban environment where it is implemented. About the second mentioned target the implementation of the strategic site concept that allowed to classify the projects (de Dalt a Baix, Baix and ni Dalt ni Baix) resulted in an effective communication tool to organize the developed work when presenting it to third agents not related with the academic world, like politicians and citizens from Altea, as it could be easily read by the people living in the village. Finally these three different areas of interest defined were the base for the organization of the communication actions developed for the public presentation of the student work results: a web page, an exhibition and a publication.

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