

Revisiting the Coast: New Practices in Maritime Heritage



REVISITING THE COAST:  
NEW PRACTICES IN  
MARITIME HERITAGE

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(eds.)

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# Contents

Introduction .....	7
JOAN LLUÍS ALEGRET, ELISEU CARBONELL	
PART 1. CONSTRUCTING MARITIME HERITAGE	
The gimmicky transformation of seafaring tradition into cultural heritage .....	21
JUAN ANTONIO APRAIZ ZALLO	
<i>De-heritaged</i> culture and heritage inventions .....	45
DAVID FLORIDO DEL CORRAL	
PART 2. NATURAL MARITIME HERITAGE	
Transforming nature and coastal areas into heritage: the case of the Celestún and Ría Lagartos Biosphere Reserves, Yucatán, Mexico .....	61
SABRINA DOYON, CATHERINE SABINOT	
Reinventing place. Heritage creation processes in el estrecho de gibraltar (the strait of gibraltar) natural park .....	81
M. ÁNGELES CORBACHO GANDULLO	
PART 3. TANGIBLE MARITIME HERITAGE	
Problems and contradictions in creating heritage status for the lighthouses of Catalonia .....	99
GEMMA DOMÈNECH	
Typology and recognition of maritime heritage: a comparative study of Atlantic Andalusia and Brittany .....	109
LOÏC MÉNANTEAU	
Socio-cultural realities as part of a silent, underlying heritage: graphic maritime expression in Santurtzi (Bizkaia) .....	135
JUAN ANTONIO RUBIO-ARDANAZ	
The sea as a pretext: the Ribera Plan (1964-1972) for Barcelona by Antoni Bonet .....	163
NADIA FAVA	

PART 4. INTANGIBLE MARITIME HERITAGE

Seafaring heritage production in neo-museographical contexts. Palamós Fish Space  
and the heritage creation process of “low-priced fish” ..... 181

JOAN LLUÍS ALEGRET

Antagonism and conflicting memories in the fishing sector: the galician case ..... 191

DIONÍSIO PEREIRA

Memories of the seafaring world in Catalonia and its transformation into cultural heritage:  
notes for a debate on the theory and practice of maritime heritage ..... 201

ELISEU CARBONELL



## **Problems and contradictions in creating heritage status for the lighthouses of Catalonia**

GEMMA DOMÈNECH<sup>1</sup>

Lighthouses are among the most outstanding elements of coastal architecture, as much for their privileged locations as for the aura of mystery and legend with which they have often been surrounded. A source of light and guidance for sailors since time immemorial, they are still indispensable for navigation today. However, automation of the lighthouses made it unnecessary to maintain the lighthouse keepers who lived and worked there. The service was discontinued on 1 January 1993 under a ministerial order issued by the Spanish government, and the lighthouse keepers were transferred to work for the port authorities or to perform other duties in the public administration. Today, the lighthouses run at full capacity with no resident employees operating them. The situation has exacerbated the already difficult task of protecting a type of architecture located by definition in a hostile environment on the edge of the coast, and affected by saline humidity. This combination of neglect and isolated locations (usually far from inhabited areas) has given rise to acts of vandalism and has endangered the conservation of the lighthouses (Rebollo, 2003; Alemany, 2006).

### **Creating heritage status for lighthouses in Catalonia**

Catalonia has a coastline of 580 kilometres with 21 conserved lighthouses, 18 of which are in active use and three are out of service. These buildings, some over 150 years old, are part of the country's heritage and a living testimony

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<sup>1</sup> Catalan Institute for Cultural Heritage Research.



*Image 1. Cala Nans lighthouse, Cadaqués (1864). Photo: ICRPC. Jordi S. Carrera*

of the maritime activity of the ports. Those located along the Catalan coast are generally accepted as heritage assets, which should be recovered and conserved. New uses must be found to ensure the conservation of this type of architecture, which is included in municipal catalogues and in the Heritage Inventory of the Autonomous Government of Catalonia.

The Port Law (2003) enabled alternative uses to be found for uninhabited lighthouses. However, the laborious paperwork required to do so meant that in 2010 under a quarter of lighthouses in Spain had been reconverted under the new regulations (Montaner, 2010). In August 2010, a reformed Port Law was passed to lighten the bureaucracy involved and make it easier to obtain permits for complementary uses. The new law is in line with measures taken by other countries to safeguard this type of architectural and technological heritage by providing lighthouses with new uses that relate to their original function and, at the same time, contribute to their maintenance.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See the interesting research studies carried out by the International Association of Lighthouse Authorities (IALA).





Image 2. *Roses lighthouse has an adaptation project awaiting execution. Photo: ICRPC. Jordi S. Carrera*

All the lighthouses in Spain are the property of the Ministry of Public Works. In Catalonia, the lighthouses located between Portbou and Vilanova i la Geltrú are managed by Barcelona Port Authority; those located between Torredembarra and Alcanar are managed by Tarragona Port Authority. All lighthouse cessions assigned to date have been for reconverting the buildings into cultural amenities.

Barcelona Port Authority, managing 13 of the Catalan lighthouses, has clearly opted to cede lighthouses to municipalities with cultural or environmental projects for the buildings. In an interview for *La Vanguardia* newspaper, the persons in charge claimed that the aim of the scheme was to “*transmit to the future generations, now so used to new technologies, the former role of lighthouses and lighthouse keepers for seafaring people*” (Angulo, 2010: 3). In theory, therefore, this new lease of life not only legitimises the conservation of the lighthouses, but also guarantees their survival as testimonies of old communication systems and the traditional ways of life of seafaring communities.

These future prospects, however, do not extend to all lighthouses. Those built in the post-automation period have no annexed living quarters that might be subject to reconversion. Visitor accessibility may pose a problem for lighthouses located in nature parks, for example. Today in Catalonia, the much-lauded complementary uses are actually restricted to a dozen projects, of which only six lighthouses have actually been reconverted. The remaining projects are still awaiting fulfilment and/or approval.



*Image 3. The location of the Medes Islands lighthouse in a protected space with restricted access complicates the question of alternative uses. Photo: ICRPC. Jordi S. Carrera*



*Image 4. Cap de Creus lighthouse, now the Nature Park Tourist Office and Interpretation Centre. Photo: ICRPC. Jordi S. Carrera*



The only Catalan lighthouses reconverted to complementary uses are those at Cap de Creus (Cadaqués), Tossa de Mar, Calella, Vilanova i la Geltrú, Montjuïc (Barcelona) and La Banya (Tarragona), of which the first four are managed by the local municipality and the last two by their respective ports. With the exception of Montjuïc, now the Port Logistics Community headquarters and used as Barcelona Port convention centre, and Cap de Creus (Cadaqués), housing Cap de Creus Nature Park Tourist Office and Interpretation Centre, the remaining lighthouses are used for cultural purposes, mainly as museums or similar.

The Maritime Museum has been housed since 1981 in Sant Cristòfol lighthouse (Vilanova i la Geltrú), the oldest in Catalonia. Over thirty years later, the museum is now being renovated and modernised to include a new permanent exhibition and Vilanova i la Geltrú Visitors' Centre (Lamo, 2011). The 1980s also witnessed the removal of La Banya lighthouse from its original location at La Punta de la Banya (Sant Carles de la Ràpita) to the east wharf of Tarragona Port. By 1990, it had been restored and set into operation, and was opened to the public three years later with a permanent exhibition on lighthouse life. Since 2003, the lighthouse has been an extension of Tarragona Port Museum. The same trend was followed in Tossa de Mar with the Mediterranean Lighthouse Interpretation Centre, opened in 2005, an ambitious project showing the origins and technological evolution of Mediterranean lighthouses. Six years later, in the summer of 2011, Calella lighthouse reopened as Calella Lighthouse Interpretation Centre, with a permanent exhibition on the history of the building, the town of Calella, and its relationship with the sea and the landscape.

These last four experiences, with different aims and results, can be used to illustrate the problems and contradictions that can occur while creating heritage status. We have chosen the case of Tossa de Mar as a paradigm of this process.



*Image 5. Tossa de Mar lighthouse, now the Mediterranean Lighthouse Interpretation Centre since 2005. Photo: ICRPC. Jordi S. Carrera*



## The Mediterranean Lighthouse Interpretation Centre (Tossa de Mar)

Tossa de Mar lighthouse is located 70 metres above sea level on Tossa Cape, at the top of the walled medieval Old Town.

The square building (15m x 15m) was built on a flat piece of land and is surrounded by a low wall. The small square tower (4m x 4m) is lit by one window and crowned by a cornice, an iron balcony, a large cylindrical tower, and the lantern. Inside are an office and the lighthouse keeper's quarters, which were later enlarged to include an annexe containing another dwelling and a garage.

The origin of the lighthouse dates back to a petition sent to the Central Maritime Signal Service in 1901 by the fishermen of Tossa de Mar. The following year, the Lighting Reform Plan responded favourably to the fishermen's request, but the lighthouse did not open until 27 August 1919. Throughout its existence of nearly a century, Tossa de Mar lighthouse underwent several major reforms (1922, 1929, 1969 and 1973) to keep abreast of technological advances. The biggest change, however, came about in 1999 when the post of lighthouse keeper was discontinued.

Once the lighthouse was unoccupied, the municipal interest in the amenity enabled cession to be granted from Barcelona Port Authority. The building, listed in the Heritage Inventory of the Autonomous Government of Catalonia, was reconverted into the Mediterranean Lighthouse Interpretation Centre, which opened in September 2005. According to the persons in charge of the project, the idea was "*to provide a hands-on educational experience of all that lighthouses have represented throughout history*" with a "*visitor-friendly museum presentation*".<sup>3</sup> Financial support for the project was obtained from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).

The opening of the Mediterranean Lighthouse Interpretation Centre on 17 September 2005 was followed by much praise. In his book on Catalan lighthouses, Joan Alemany describes it as "*a very positive experience that should be borne in mind in this process of conservation and re-use of lighthouse annexes*" (Alemany, 2006: 119).

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3 TOSSA DE MAR TOWN COUNCIL *Mediterranean Lighthouse Interpretation Centre*, <http://www.tossademar.com/far/home.htm> [consulted 4 May 2012]



Image 6. Tossa de Mar lighthouse after reconversion. Photo: ICRPG. Jordi S. Carrera

In like manner, the “*privileged environment and the content of the project*” were to become “*a reference in the world of maritime heritage, and the world of lighthouses in particular*”.<sup>4</sup> However, seven years after it was opened, the interpretation centre is now in a deplorable state. A series of errors and failures have led to it being practically closed down. It is still advertised as “*one of the newest and most interesting cultural and leisure spaces on the Costa Brava*”<sup>5</sup> but, due to maintenance problems with the lighthouse machinery, most of the time visitors can only access the bar and the shop.

The maintenance problems appeared early on. The use of obsolete apparatus containing parts that are difficult and expensive to replace, and other equipment unsuited to the saline humidity of the coastal environment, have caused repeated breakdowns often leading to the partial closure of the amenity. Faced with the series of mishaps affecting the project, the Town Council has opted to pay for repair work whenever it can and to avoid confrontation with those responsible for the failures.

4 TOSSA DE MAR TOWN COUNCIL *Mediterranean Lighthouse Interpretation Centre*, <http://www.tossademar.com/far/home.htm> [consulted 4 May 2012]

5 TOSSA DE MAR TOWN COUNCIL *Mediterranean Lighthouse Interpretation Centre*, <http://www.tossademar.com/far/home.htm> [consulted 4 May 2012]



*Image 7. Visitors at the lookout point with the lighthouse bar in the background. Photo: ICRPC. G. Domènech*



*Image 8. Tourist train ticket office. Photo: ICRPC. G. Domènech*



Tossa de Mar lighthouse is located at the top of the Old Town, the main tourist route and the most appreciated heritage site in the municipality. A tourist train is provided for visitors, and the Interpretation Centre has received generous advertising (website, 16-page colour brochures in eight languages, constant press coverage, and so on). This all helps to make Tossa de Mar an attractive place for visitors, who must be disappointed when they are unable to enjoy the experience described as follows on the Town Council website “*A visit to Tossa de Mar lighthouse is a moving, hands-on, educational introduction to the world of lighthouses. The spaces within illustrate some of the main features of the technology and the personality of lighthouses, their history and their evolution. You will find information on lighthouse architecture, the life of the lighthouse keepers, the first fire signals, the literature and films on the subject, and much more. Stroll through this fascinating world of the sea: the lighthouse*”.<sup>6</sup> Instead, visitors find a small shop selling postcards and other souvenirs, and a sunny terrace on which to enjoy a cool drink in the sea breeze, while gazing on the agave plants and the closed doors of the Mediterranean Lighthouse Interpretation Centre.

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6 TOSSA DE MAR TOWN COUNCIL *Mediterranean Lighthouse Interpretation Centre*, <http://www.tossademar.com/far/home.htm> [consulted 4 May 2012]