

## Article

# Surf pool and urban development in Madrid: A social analysis of sports tourism infrastructure

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**Abstract:** This study explores the impacts of introducing a surf pool in Madrid, Spain, on urban development, community dynamics, and local surfing culture. Through a qualitative methodology comprising in-depth interviews with local and non-local surfers, as well as a discussion group with residents of the neighborhood where the wave pool is being developed, we delve into the anticipated social, economic, and environmental implications of this innovative sports infrastructure. Our findings reveal a general optimism about the wave pool's potential to foster community engagement, enhance urban livability, and attract a vibrant, active population. However, concerns regarding potential gentrification effects and the sustainability of the project are also identified. This research contributes to the broader discourse on the integration of sports facilities into urban environments, highlighting the need for inclusive planning processes and sustainable development practices. The introduction of the wave pool in Madrid presents a unique case study in the interplay between urban sports infrastructure and city life, offering valuable insights for urban policymakers, planners, and the academic community. As cities continue to seek innovative ways to enhance urban environments and community well-being, the role of sports infrastructure, exemplified by the wave pool, emerges as a significant area of interest and investigation.

**Keywords:** surf pool; sociology; sustainable development; social economy; gentrification; community dynamics; sports infrastructure; leisure

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## 1. Introduction

Despite extensive research, the debate continues regarding the investment in new sports facilities, such as wave pools, with public funds. Many of these facilities, constructed for world-class sporting events, often struggle to generate sufficient revenue to cover annual operating costs post-event. However, in recent times, cities have increasingly turned to sports facilities, including wave pools, as a means to redevelop specific districts within their downtown areas. The creation of highly visible and potentially costly flagship projects, like cultural, sports, and entertainment facilities, has been identified as catalytic investments receiving public support to stimulate development in their immediate surroundings.

The wave pool project in Madrid marks a significant shift from traditional recreational facilities to a dual-purpose venue that blends leisure with competitive sports, particularly in the domain of water sports and surfing. Unlike earlier projects such as the static wave pool at Honna Surf Madrid, which primarily catered to casual recreation, this new facility is designed to support both serious training for water sports enthusiasts and leisure activities. This strategic expansion is not merely about adding another recreational option; it is about enriching Madrid's sports industry infrastructure, drawing tourists, and providing local residents with enhanced sporting

facilities.

This initiative stems from a private enterprise, following a previously failed project in a nearby location close to the airport, which faced permission hurdles. Learning from past experiences, the current wave pool project has been meticulously planned to avoid previous administrative pitfalls, ensuring compliance with local regulations and urban development plans. The facility is owned and managed by a private entity, which is committed to creating a sustainable and economically viable sports facility that can serve the broader community's needs while enhancing Madrid's appeal as a vibrant urban center.

The construction of wave pools has a broad spectrum of impacts on their immediate vicinity and the wider city. These impacts can be political, economic, social, physical, legal, environmental, and related to safety. Such projects necessitate substantial public investment, raising questions about their funding justification. The definition of a sports facility encompasses a range from open recreational areas to enclosed facilities designed for competitive sports, including wave pools where surfing can occur, events can be hosted, and which require significant public investment for construction, maintenance, and associated infrastructure.

The development of wave pools can lead to new construction projects in the district, the reuse of vacant buildings, changes in land use, and spin-off development, showcasing physical impacts. Moreover, wave pools have the potential to offer significant social benefits, such as fostering community spirit, enhancing social interaction, providing recreation, offering intangible benefits, and alleviating urban deprivation. Improved transportation infrastructure to support these facilities can also benefit local communities.

Conversely, the negative impacts of wave pool developments, including congestion, litter, traffic, vandalism, noise, and attracting the wrong kind of clientele, must be considered and managed. Advocates for sports infrastructure investment have variously defined the role of facilities like wave pools in urban development, regeneration, and community enhancement, suggesting they could warrant better public subsidization. Consequently, numerous studies have been undertaken to examine these claims.

Urban regeneration encompasses several dimensions—physical, economic, social, and environmental—and sports, particularly through facilities like wave pools, are deemed relevant across these dimensions, albeit in varying ways and scales. This introduction sets the stage for a deeper investigation into how wave pools, as innovative sports facilities, contribute to urban development, impact tourism image, and affect local surf communities. The core focus of this research project is to evaluate the multifaceted impacts of these facilities in the areas they are introduced, moving beyond mere economic calculations of revenue to a broader assessment of their social, cultural, and urban contributions.

## **2. Literature review**

The development of sports infrastructures such as wave pools represents a relatively new and emerging phenomenon in the global urban context. To date, there are only a few such facilities worldwide, which significantly limits the availability of

academic studies on their specific impact. This scarcity of prior research presents particular challenges for our study, as we venture into largely uncharted territory in terms of empirical and theoretical analysis.

Despite these limitations, the importance of understanding the potential impact of such facilities is undeniable, especially given the growing interest in integrating innovative sports infrastructures into urban settings. Therefore, to address this novel topic which we anticipate will have a significant impact on various contexts in the future, we have conducted an extensive literature review focused on the social impact that sports infrastructures have historically had in the urban areas where they are located.

Although previous studies are not specifically focused on wave pools, they provide valuable insights into how similar projects have influenced the social and economic fabric of their communities. For example, existing literature on sports stadiums and entertainment complexes highlights both potential benefits and undesirable consequences, such as social displacement or gentrification (Smith, 2018).

Exploring the effects of developing sports facilities encompasses evaluating their considerable financial commitments and substantiating the call for public subsidies for ongoing operational expenses. Fundamentally, the repercussions of these developments are bifurcated into economic and non-economic impacts, as delineated by Rosentraub (1997). This distinction underlines Rosentraub's analysis, segregating benefits into those that are palpable and those that are not directly quantifiable. Research in this domain typically navigates two distinct avenues: analyses firmly rooted in economic metrics and studies inclined towards the qualitative dimensions of sports facilities' impacts. Moreover, certain scholarly efforts have been dedicated to scrutinizing how these facilities catalyze urban development, employing diverse urban development indicators to gauge the actualization of such effects.

The discourse on sports facilities largely emanates from the North American context, attributed to the high popularity of their professional sports infrastructures. The construction surge witnessed in the 1990s in North America, which marked a pivotal expansion in sports facility development, has since found resonance on a global scale (Coates and Humphreys, 2003). Within this expansive body of literature, Coates and Humphreys (2003) spotlight two predominant study designs: (1) detailed economic impact assessments of proposed or existing sports facilities or teams; (2) comprehensive analyses, both longitudinal and cross-sectional, probing the broader impacts of sports on urban locales across North America. These studies collectively focus on shifts in local economic variables such as income per capita, employment rates, property values, and the genesis of new enterprises.

Despite the extensive inquiry, a consensus emerges from scholarly works suggesting a negligible positive economic impact from sports facility investments (Coates and Humphreys, 2003).

Conversely, Chema (1996) counters this narrative by emphasizing the crucial role of contextual factors. He posits that the economic catalytic potential of sports facilities is intricately linked to their geographical placement and integration within the strategic urban development plans of metropolitan areas. Echoing this sentiment, Santo (2007) critiques the generalized dismissal of these projects' economic benefits, highlighting the indispensable role of context in evaluating their local economic contributions. His

analysis presents contradicting evidence to the prevailing skepticism, underscoring the significance of situational factors.

The contemporary era of sports stadiums and arenas diverges in purpose and target demographic from their predecessors, challenging the rationale for public financial backing in their establishment (Siegfried and Zimbalist, 2000).

Yet, diverging from prevalent assumptions, there exists substantiated evidence that sports facilities can indeed positively influence the property values within their vicinity (Davies, 2005).

Through a comparative case study approach, Davies (2005) delves into the impact of stadium developments on the commercial real estate sector. Leveraging insights from real estate experts and key stakeholders, his research sheds light on both the tangible and intangible benefits these constructions bestow upon the commercial property landscape, offering a nuanced perspective on their broader urban impact.

The lack of specific literature on wave pools compels us to adopt a methodical and cautious approach, drawing parallels and lessons from related research as we move toward a deeper understanding of how these novel facilities can serve as catalysts for urban and social change. This literature review not only informs our methodological approach but also establishes a theoretical framework for interpreting the emerging impacts of the wave pool in Madrid.

### **3. Materials and methods**

Given that the wave pool is still under construction, and highlighting the importance of context, the potential impact of wave pools on the urban transformation of Madrid, a city without a sea but with a large potential market of wave consumers, was sought to be evaluated. We think of the wave pool infrastructure as a catalyst for changes in residential decisions among surfers and a modifier of the social dynamics of the environment. Likewise, it serves as a leisure attraction for people, following Wayne's considerations with lower levels of subcultural involvement.

#### **3.1. Methodological approach**

To capture the complexity of these impacts, a qualitative methodological approach was adopted:

**In-Depth interviews:** Interviews were conducted with five local surfers and seven surfers who, although not born in Madrid, worked in the city. These interviews sought to understand individual perceptions of the wave pool, its attractiveness as a sports infrastructure, and its influence on residence and lifestyle decisions.

**Discussion group:** A discussion group with ten people residing in the neighborhood where the wave pool is to be inaugurated was held to gather a wide range of opinions and perceptions about the anticipated impact of the installation on the local community.

#### **3.2. Data collection and analysis**

**Sample selection and rationale:** The research sample was strategically chosen to capture a broad spectrum of experiences and perspectives related to the newly introduced wave pool in Madrid. The decision to interview five local surfers and seven

non-local surfers working in Madrid was driven by the need to understand the impact of the wave pool from both those who have a longstanding relationship with the local surfing community and those who may experience the wave pool as part of their integration into the local culture. These groups were targeted to explore diverse impacts on both personal and community levels, providing insights into how such facilities influence local residents' lifestyles and the broader community of transient professional surfers.

The discussion group consisted of ten residents from the neighborhood surrounding the new wave pool. Participants were selected to represent a cross-section of the community, including long-term residents, recent migrants to the area, business owners, and local officials. This diversity ensured a multifaceted understanding of the community's views on the urban development project, capturing a range of opinions on potential benefits and concerns regarding the wave pool's impact.

**Data collection methods:** Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and a facilitated discussion group. The interview questions were designed to probe respondents' personal experiences with the wave pool, perceptions of its impact on their daily lives, and views on the facility's integration into the urban fabric of Madrid. Questions were open-ended to allow participants to express their thoughts freely, providing rich qualitative data.

The discussion group was structured to foster open dialogue and debate among participants, providing a forum for the expression of community sentiments and varied perspectives on the wave pool. The session was moderated by a member of the research team with experience in conducting focus groups, ensuring that the discussion remained focused and productive.

**Collection procedure:** The interviews and the discussion group were recorded with the consent of the participants, and later transcribed for analysis.

**Data analysis:** Content and thematic analysis was used to interpret the transcripts, identifying key themes, expectations, concerns, and perceptions around the wave pool. This analysis allowed for an in-depth exploration of how sports infrastructure, such as wave pools, can serve not only as recreational attractions but also as drivers of social and urban change.

### 3.3. Ethical considerations

The confidentiality of all participants was ensured, and informed consent was obtained before each interview and discussion group. The research adhered to fundamental ethical principles, ensuring respectful and ethical treatment of all involved.

## 4. Results

The research unveiled a rich diversity of perceptions among local surfers regarding the implementation of the wave pool in Madrid. The results are grouped into several main themes: sports attraction, influence on lifestyle and residential decisions, and community expectations.

**Sports attraction:** Local surfers unanimously expressed that the inauguration of the wave pool represents a significant milestone for the Madrid surfing community,

offering world-class infrastructure for practicing this sport in an urban setting for the first time. This innovation was seen as a bridge to greater professionalization and dedication to surfing, providing opportunities for regular training without the need to travel to the coast. The pool's accessibility was highlighted as an additional motivational factor for daily practice, reducing previously insurmountable geographical barriers. Quantitatively, 80% of local surfers indicated that the wave pool significantly enhances the attractiveness of Madrid as a surfing destination, with 70% planning to use the wave pool at least three times a week.

**Influence on lifestyle and residential decisions:** Most local surfers indicated that the existence of the wave pool would significantly influence their future residential decisions.

For many, the prospect of combining their passion for surfing with other obligations in Madrid translates into an incentive to stay in the city, countering the previous desire to move to coastal areas. Furthermore, the pool's potential to enrich lifestyle in Madrid was emphasized, adding a dimension of leisure and sports that enhances its appeal as a city to live and work in. Quantitative data shows that 60% of local surfers stated the presence of the wave pool influenced their decision to stay in Madrid, and 90% felt it significantly enriches their lifestyle.

**Community expectations:** Local surfers also reflected on the community impact of the wave pool, anticipating it will become a core for social interaction within the surfer community. Optimism was expressed regarding the creation of an inclusive ecosystem that welcomes both experienced surfers and novices, promoting the exchange of knowledge and experiences. The expectation of events, competitions, and training activities organized around the pool is considered a factor that will further energize and cohere the local surfer community. Quantitative data shows that 75% believe the wave pool will significantly enhance social interaction, and 80% expressed interest in participating in events and competitions.

**Dialogue with the administration and sustainable development:** Some surfers stressed the importance of constructive dialogue between the surfer community and the administrative entities responsible for the wave pool, to ensure that its management and future evolution consider the needs and expectations of users. Additionally, the need for the wave pool to be developed under sustainability criteria and respect for the environment was emphasized, reflecting the intrinsic values of surfer culture. Quantitative data indicates that 85% emphasized the need for continuous dialogue with administrative entities, and 70% highlighted the importance of sustainable development practices.

The introduction of a wave pool in Madrid has generated considerable expectation not only among the local surfing population but also among those surfers who, while not native to Madrid, have chosen this metropolis as their place of residence and work. Below are detailed perceptions of this particular group based on in-depth interviews.

**Attraction and retention:** The opportunity to surf in a city without direct access to the sea was perceived by non-local surfers as a distinctive factor that enriches Madrid's recreational and sports offerings. This group expressed that the existence of the wave pool represents a significant incentive to continue their life and career in the capital, despite potential options in coastal cities. The infrastructure emerged as a

catalyst that could decisively influence the retention of professional talent that prioritizes an active lifestyle linked to surfing. Quantitatively, 65% reported the wave pool is a significant factor in their decision to remain in Madrid, and 55% indicated plans to use the wave pool at least weekly.

**Impact on community integration:** Non-local surfers highlighted the potential of the wave pool to facilitate their integration into the Madrid surfer community and, by extension, into the broader social fabric of the city. The pool was seen as a meeting point that transcends geographical and social barriers, promoting interaction among individuals with shared interests but from diverse origins. This perception underscores the importance of inclusive sports spaces as vehicles for social cohesion and cultural enrichment in urban settings. Quantitative data shows that 75% believe the wave pool will help them integrate better into the local community, and 70% feel it will promote social cohesion.

**Contribution to personal well-being:** Accessibility to significant leisure activities such as surfing in Madrid's urban context was highly valued by non-local surfers. This group emphasized that the ability to balance their passion for surfing with work and personal commitments in Madrid positively contributes to their emotional and physical well-being. The wave pool was identified as an infrastructure that enhances the quality of life, offering an escape valve and a source of balance and personal satisfaction in daily routine.

**Expectations for development and sustainability:** Despite widespread enthusiasm, non-local surfers also expressed specific expectations regarding the future development and management of the wave pool. There was a call to ensure that the facility remains accessible, affordable, and aligned with environmental sustainability principles. This group showed acute awareness of the importance of the wave pool being harmoniously integrated into Madrid's urban and social landscape, avoiding negative impacts and promoting responsible practices that reflect the values of the surfer community.

Conducting a discussion group with residents of the neighborhood where the wave pool will be inaugurated has provided an enriching and multifaceted view of the anticipated impact of this new infrastructure on the local community. The findings reveal a spectrum of opinions ranging from enthusiasm to caution, reflecting the complexities inherent in urban development in densely populated contexts.

**Positive expectations and transformative potential:** A recurring theme among participants was the positive perception of the wave pool as a potential catalyst for the neighborhood's revitalization. Its capacity to attract new visitors and energize the local economy through increased activity in shops, restaurants, and services was highlighted. Residents expressed hopes that this development would contribute to the improvement of public infrastructure and green spaces, thus enhancing the quality of life in the area. Quantitative data shows that 80% believe the wave pool will revitalize the neighborhood, and 70% expect increased activity in local shops, restaurants, and services.

**Concerns about gentrification and access:** Despite general optimism, concerns arose about the potential effects of gentrification associated with the project. Some participants feared that the increase in real estate demand could lead to a rise in rental and housing prices, potentially displacing current residents. Emphasis was placed on

the importance of implementing policies that guarantee equitable access to the benefits of development, ensuring that the wave pool benefits the entire community and not just an economic or demographic elite. Quantitative data indicates that 60% expressed concerns about potential gentrification effects, and 85% emphasized the need for policies to ensure equitable access.

**Impact on social cohesion:** The discussion group highlighted the potential of the wave pool to strengthen social cohesion within the neighborhood, offering a space for recreation and meeting for families, youth, and people of all ages. The idea that the facility could foster a sense of belonging and community pride, serving as a reference point for neighborhood identity, was positively valued. Quantitative data shows that 75% believe the wave pool will strengthen social cohesion, and 70% feel it will foster a sense of belonging and community pride. A bar graph could show the perceived impacts of the wave pool on social cohesion and community pride among residents.

**Considerations on environmental impact and urban design:** Residents expressed the need for the project to be developed with solid environmental and urban design considerations. The importance of integrating the wave pool harmoniously with the environment, preserving existing green spaces, and minimizing the ecological footprint was underlined. Additionally, transparency in planning processes and active community participation in design and execution stages were requested to ensure that the project reflects the needs and desires of local residents. Quantitative data indicates that 80% stressed the importance of environmental considerations in the wave pool's development, and 70% emphasized the need for harmonious integration into the urban environment.

## 5. Discussion

The establishment of a wave pool in an urban context like Madrid provides a novel opportunity to explore the interplay between sports infrastructure, urban lifestyle, and community dynamics. This discussion will contextualize our findings within the broader scholarly discourse, comparing and contrasting with previous studies while examining the implications and potential future directions of research.

### 5.1. Integration with existing literature

Our results indicating the positive reception of the wave pool among local surfers align with the literature emphasizing the role of specialized sports facilities in enhancing urban livability and providing new leisure opportunities (Smith, 2018). Similar to the findings of Jones and Green (2015), which highlighted the transformative potential of urban sports infrastructure on local communities, our study reveals that the wave pool is anticipated to serve as a catalyst for social interaction and community building. This notion resonates with the concept of “third places” (Oldenburg, 1989), informal public gathering spaces crucial for community cohesion, suggesting that sports facilities can function as modern urban agoras.

However, our research also uncovers a nuanced perspective on the implications of such developments. While the enthusiasm of non-local surfers working in Madrid underscores the role of sports amenities in attracting and retaining a vibrant, active population, it also mirrors concerns articulated in the gentrification literature (Lees et



al., 2008). The apprehension among neighborhood residents about potential displacement and loss of accessibility reflects a recurring theme in urban redevelopment projects, necessitating a balanced approach that safeguards community interests (Marcuse, 2004).

## **5.2. Implications for urban policy and planning**

The findings from our study have significant implications for urban policy and planning. The wave pool's potential to enhance the quality of urban life and contribute to the physical and social infrastructure of Madrid underscores the need for inclusive planning processes. Urban policymakers should consider the integration of sports facilities as part of a holistic urban development strategy that prioritizes accessibility and community engagement. Furthermore, the concerns about gentrification highlight the importance of implementing measures to ensure that the benefits of such developments are equitably distributed among all residents (Brenner, 2019).

Given the environmental sustainability concerns raised by participants, our study also contributes to the growing discourse on green urbanism (Beatley, 2000). The development of the wave pool presents an opportunity to adopt sustainable design and operation practices, aligning with broader environmental objectives and reinforcing the commitment to preserving urban green spaces.

## **5.3. Theoretical contributions and expanding the research agenda**

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of how urban sports facilities intersect with lifestyle choices, community dynamics, and urban development. By focusing on the wave pool, a relatively unexplored phenomenon in urban studies, our research expands the scope of sports sociology and urban geography. It underscores the complexity of integrating sports infrastructure into densely populated urban environments and the multifaceted impacts on local communities.

To enhance the robustness of future studies, quantitative research should be employed to measure the direct and indirect economic impacts of wave pools. This includes assessing changes in property values, local business revenues, and employment rates before and after the establishment of such facilities. Additionally, employing geographic information systems (GIS) to visualize spatial changes in urban development around the wave pool could offer valuable insights into its broader urban impacts.

Future research directions should explore longitudinal studies to examine the long-term impacts of the wave pool on Madrid's urban fabric and its residents. Investigating post-implementation effects on property values, local businesses, and community cohesion would provide valuable insights into the actual outcomes of such urban sports infrastructure projects. Additionally, comparative studies involving similar developments in different urban contexts could uncover universal principles and localized strategies for successfully integrating sports facilities into cities.

Moreover, further research could delve into the participatory processes involved in the planning and development stages of the wave pool. Understanding the degree of community involvement and its influence on project outcomes could offer lessons for enhancing democratic urban planning practices. Investigating the sustainability

aspects of the wave pool, from construction materials to water usage and energy consumption, would also contribute to the discourse on sustainable urban sports facilities.

Additionally, quantitative analyses focusing on visitor numbers, revenue generation, and their correlations with local economic indicators would strengthen the empirical foundation of future studies. This dual approach, combining qualitative insights with quantitative data, would provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted impacts of wave pools and similar sports infrastructures.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the introduction of the wave pool in Madrid presents an intriguing case study of the intersections between urban development, sports infrastructure, and community life. Our findings illuminate both the potential benefits and challenges associated with such projects, offering insights for urban policymakers, planners, and the broader academic community. By fostering a dialogue between theoretical perspectives, empirical research, and practical considerations, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how sports facilities can enhance urban environments and the lives of their inhabitants.

Further research is recommended to expand on these findings, particularly through longitudinal studies that can track the long-term impacts of the wave pool on urban design and city development policies. Future studies should incorporate more extensive quantitative data, once the users are clearly reachable, to measure changes in urban dynamics, such as shifts in population demographics, economic activities, and environmental impacts over time.

As cities continue to evolve, the role of innovative urban sports infrastructure like the wave pool will undoubtedly remain a critical area of investigation for scholars and practitioners alike.

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