ADOLF ROMAGOSA, THE MAN WHO UNITED THE PORT WITH THE CITY



From infrastructure to relationship: a life dedicated to uniting the port with Barcelona

Category: Interview

Tag: #16

SPRING 2026

TEXT: Jordi Garriga. Journalist and writer.

FOTO: Adolf Romagosa Collection.

Connected to the Barcelona Port Authority for more than twenty years and the manager of Port 2000 from 2006 to 2016, Adolf Romagosa experienced the great transformation of Port Vell from within along with the slow, complex and often contradictory reconciliation between the port and the city.

An industrial engineer by training with no strong connection to the sea until he landed in the port, today he

is in fact one of those people who we must always think about when talking about the sea, the port and all the people who are related or have been related to it in one way or another. As he explains to us, the fact is that his main task was to build relationships, mediate conflicts and, ultimately, act as a bridge between worlds that did not always speak to each other. Now enjoying his retirement, thanks to his intense activity in this field he continues to organise the group “Desayunos itinerantes”, or Roaming Breakfasts, a dynamic network of people linked to the sea, an informal ecosystem that is, perhaps, the clearest metaphor for his legacy.

Talking to him means talking about urban planning, but also about culture, politics, business, the blue economy, our collective memory and a persistent idea: Barcelona is still learning to be a port city.

"The port has to come to get along with the city"

You arrived at the port at a time of profound transformation. What personal memory stands out to you most from those years?

What I remember most is not any specific project, but rather a change in mentality. When I arrived, the port was a very technical world. Lots of engineers, from the terminals, traffic, goods and so on. At that time, the relationship between the port, its customers and the city was indirect and involved a great deal of mediation.

I arrived to implement the Quality Assurance Plan. At that time, a decision was made to create the Customer Service Department. It seemed like a minor thing, but it wasn't at all. Creating this department meant saying: "Let's talk directly to those who use the port. Let's listen to them." That also meant talking to the owners of the goods, transporters, fishermen, inspectors, and many more people from very diverse groups. There were lots of conflicts and my job was often to act as a mediator. When there was a fire, metaphorically speaking, we got involved. It was a job for firefighters, but also for weavers.

Your work at the port involved several stages, tell me about them.

What I mentioned previously was the first stage. Later, I became the head of the office of the director, Josep Oriol Carreras. I basically specialised in solving the problems that arose from communities such as fishermen, Can Tunis, transporters and more. Except for the stevedores, anyone who had some type of conflict went through me. The third and final stage began in 2006, when I took over the management of Port 2000, the entity in charge of the great urban transformation of Barcelona's Port Vell. Port 2000 entailed a very big step in terms of changing the mentality of what Port Vell had been and what it should be. Apparently it was a great feat of engineering, but it was much more than that. It involved working on the social relationship with the surroundings and redefining the relationship between the port and the city. We were pioneers and we faced strong internal criticism.

Indeed, the Marina Port Vell project generated a lot of debate. How do you view it today?

It was delicate. The megayachts generated a lot of suspicion: it seemed that the port was being privatised. But it is also true that it enhanced Barcelona's position within a very powerful international segment. The problem is not so much the project itself, but how it is explained. If there is no shared story, the perception

is that it is a threat.

So, do you consider yourself more of a relational manager than an infrastructure manager?

Absolutely. When I arrived, it was a world of building technicians and engineers, but my contribution was not to design buildings or infrastructure, but rather to establish relationships. I had to stress an understanding that the port cannot function only as a logistics machine. It is a social reality. When Port 2000 was implemented, the great urban transformation of Port Vell, it was a spectacular work of engineering. But then we needed a second transformation: the relationship with the city. Without that, everything would remain a façade.

In this sense, how would you define your personal contribution to this great task of reconnecting the city and the sea?

As I said, I was able to connect worlds that until then viewed the other with suspicion and didn't even know each other. I think I succeeded. When I landed at the port I came from the automotive world and I was very clear that I had to understand and comprehend the sea and the nautical world. That's why the doors of my office were always open to talk to anyone about any topic. We started having coffees with whoever wanted. A port is an exciting world. There are always mysteries. So I explained mysteries and they told me about nautical matters. Little by little I created a fabulous network of relationships. All of them are seafarers, people from the port, although from very different realities. We saw each other, chatted and debated in a civilised way. It was an enriching experience for everyone.

Precisely, beyond institutional politics, you have continued to build networks. Tell me about this WhatsApp group that you often mention.

It's a very curious thing. The group came about from this kind of informal roundtable discussion that we held during the Port 2000 stage. There were four of us, although sometimes there were only two. We told stories about the port, we talked about what was happening. Over time, that roundtable evolved and when I retired I made sure it continued through the WhatsApp group "Desayunos intinerantes", or Roaming Breakfasts. Today there are more than four hundred people: scientists from the Institute of Marine Sciences, people from Barceloneta, nautical professionals, biologists, business people and more. The common denominator is the sea. What interests me most is this: building relationships. Even if there are disagreements. It's a reflection of society. It shows that the sea can be a meeting point. After all, people need to interact, and even more so in the very individualistic society in which we live. "Desayunos itinerantes" is like a family ecosystem. No one drops out. It is wonderful.

In 1992 Barcelona "opened up to the sea." From today's perspective, have we been able to take advantage of that opening?

We have made progress, but it is difficult. In many ways Barcelona continues to be a city with a port, rather than a port city. This is a subtle but important difference. A city with a port tolerates the port. A port city integrates the port into its identity. That said, there has been a key change: the emergence of the idea of the blue economy. When I started, the sea was almost exclusively a leisure space. Today it offers innovation, technology, research and employment. This transforms the institutional perspective. When I arrived, the sea was a great unknown; the City Council lacked a great deal of knowledge about it, but with the emergence of the concept of the blue economy, everything that was ugly and unknown has become something interesting.

Let's talk about this blue economy. Is it a truly transformative concept or just a label?

It is transformative if it is real. If it is just a label, it is useless. When the sea is seen as a generator of sustainable economic activity, then the discourse changes. Foundations appear, strategic plans are drawn up, Barcelona Activa gets involved, innovation projects are launched and much more. But the challenge is making sure this is really needed. If it does not reach the people, it remains only in the headlines.
But we have to be optimistic. The City Council now has the Strategic Plan for the coast and Barcelona is devoting a lot of energy to using the sea as a dynamic element of the economy. It is a radical change. When we invented the nautical cluster, around 2012-2013, we began to see that the port environment was much more than we thought: the el Far Consortium, the Faculty of Nautical Science, the Institute of Marine Sciences, the Museu Marítim itself and more. We were able to clearly identify that there were numerous elements, but they were very disconnected. We needed to explain ourselves and we did. Currently, the reality is very different, and much better.

You often talk about the need for major projects to leave a legacy. What legacy did the Copa America leave, for example?

Technologically it was impressive. But the legacy is not just in terms of infrastructure. The legacy is cultural. If the local people don't feel that it is part of their story, it disappears. Barcelona must be very careful with projects that shine brightly for a year and then fade away. A port city is not just one that organises big events. It is one that builds continuity.

Has the relationship between the City Council and the port changed in recent years?

Yes. Historically there were tensions. They are two separate administrations: the port forms part of the State; the city is a local government. This generates inevitable friction. But today there is a greater willingness to live together. More shared awareness. The port has a better understanding that it must maintain a constant dialogue with the environment. Meanwhile, the city understands the complexity of the port better.
The overall outlook is positive. We have gone from a port that lived with its back to the city to a port that lives alongside it. In any case, the port has to get along with the city.

Is Barcelona really an international nautical benchmark?

Barcelona is not Monaco. It is not Cannes. It is a hybrid reality. It has industry, cruises, research, nautical sports and innovation. This complexity is its strength.
We are not the first in everything, but we have a powerful base: Marina 92, research centres, clubs, training complexes and so on. The challenge is to explain it better and make it cohesive.

You advocate for creating maritime culture from the ground up. How can this be built?

With children and young people. If the sea is just a landscape, it does not forge an identity. If it is an experience, it does. Sailing centres, schools, educational projects, foundations and more are all key. But the sea must be part of a shared story. Maritime culture does not just come about on its own. It must be built.

After more than twenty years at the port and almost ten years of active retirement, what are the urgent challenges?

First, to consolidate a stable relationship of trust between port and city; second, to ensure that major projects leave a real legacy; third, to explain what we do in a better way. Barcelona cannot afford for things to disappear without a story. A port city is also a city that knows how to explain its maritime history, even its mistakes.

What message would you leave to the readers of Argo magazine?

That the sea is not just a horizon. It affects our economy, culture, memory and future. And that if it didn't exist, we would have to invent it.









10 QUESTIONS

A sea?

The Mediterranean.

A beach?

Sant Sebastià.

A sea animal?

The seahorse.

A maritime sport or hobby?

Sailing.

A book to take to a secluded cove?

The Little Prince.

And a music album?

Something by Nina Simone.

What is your first memory of the sea?

In Tossa de Mar, as a child. I remember the tourists and once a man was drowning and I saw the lifeguard just looking at him without going to help. “He needs to tire himself out. Otherwise, instead of helping him, we’ll both drown.”

Think of the sea and describe its blue.
Serenity.

If you had to run away, you would go to…

Ametlla de Mar.

Finish the sentence: if the sea didn’t exist…

We would have to invent it.



The transformations of the port of Barcelona cannot be understood without Adolf Romagosa as a mediator. Photo: Adolf Romagosa Collection.