

## SPAIN

WORDS | Alex Evans

# Native understanding

By combining international experience with a deeper understanding of cultural differences, project manager Mark Lawson has become a more credible spokesperson for Spain's property market

With over 25 years of property management and resort development experience, both in the UK and in Spain, Mark Lawson believes that his ability to apply this expertise cross-culturally is the secret of his success.

A fluent Spanish speaker and writer, Mark regularly contributes to various industry publications, speaks at professional forums within the industry, and also lectures at business schools in Malaga and Seville as part of their Project Management faculties.

Before setting up his own project

management company, MDCl, he worked with Marriott to build their first three vacation resorts in Europe. "Marriott was actually my first customer," explains Mark. "It was a real challenge to work with Marriott initially as they didn't have any European experience at that time. For instance, in Spain we tend to use marble for the flooring – but as an American company they were used to using lino and wanted to do the same in Spain. They also wanted to use Cuban workers, but in Spain they couldn't.

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"So we had to adapt the US specification and look to work for European buyers. We achieved this and Mr Marriott came over for the official opening and thanked me personally". Using the lessons learnt while working with Marriott inhouse, MDCl now offers the same services to private investors that want to

create luxury build. "We are one of the few companies to have ISO9001 accreditation," adds Lawson.

## The perfect storm

Managing cross-cultural differences is one thing, but the socio-economic environment in Spain has changed considerably in the last few years. "The market in Spain is definitely suffering 'the perfect storm' at the moment," says Lawson. "New laws have come in requiring developers to plan in social housing considerations alongside resorts (which costs time and money), the market has fallen drastically due to issues impacting purchasers (with buyers maxed out), and the banks are not lending like before. All this has come together at once to create a real crisis.

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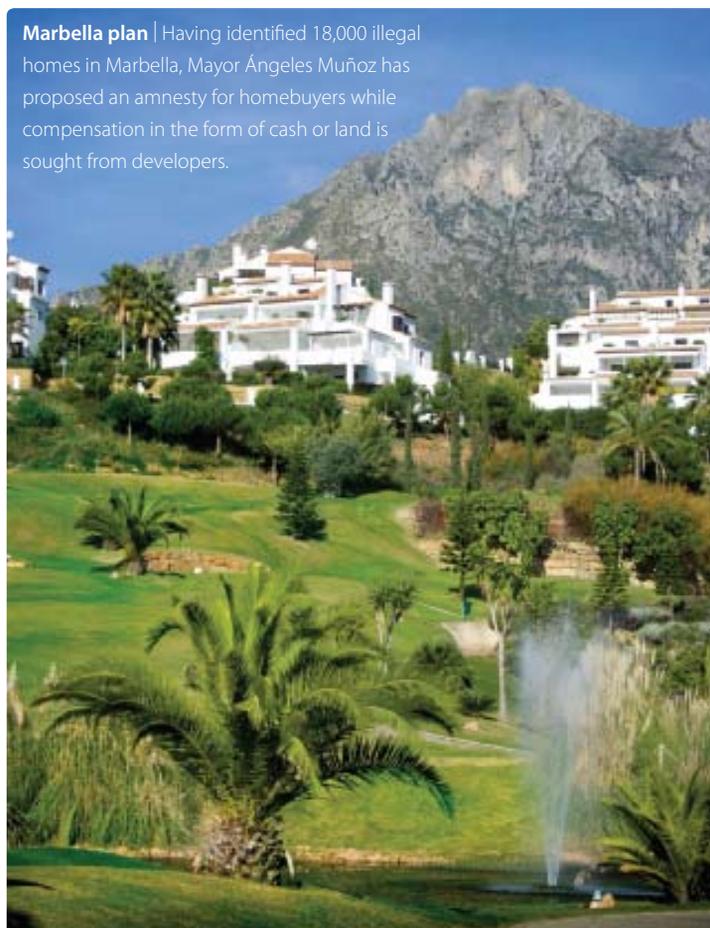
So what does this mean for a property management company specialising in developments on the Costa del Sol? "Ideally, a project manager should come in at the land purchase stage, so they can properly prepare for quality and on-time delivery. But we have also been asked to intervene quite late in



## Biography

Mark's career began at UK construction company Sunley Holdings PLC, where he gained "an understanding of a developer's ultimate objectives", before becoming Project Director of Resort Design and Construction in Europe for Marriott Vacation Club International and making his name with prestigious projects including the award winning Marbella Beach Resort. In 1999, Mark founded MDCl, a now widely respected project management company on the Costa del Sol that specialises in hotels, resorts and luxury villas. MDCl has delivered over 2,300 residential units on 40 different projects, with a total value of more than €350million – "all delivered on budget, on time and to full client satisfaction".

**Marbella plan** | Having identified 18,000 illegal homes in Marbella, Mayor Angeles Muñoz has proposed an amnesty for homebuyers while compensation in the form of cash or land is sought from developers.





the development process, in cases where inexperienced developers have run into difficulties. We had one case where the developer suddenly found that the banks wouldn't lend, and local suppliers were trying to negotiate backhanders to deliver what had already been agreed. In that case, we had to go in and work closely with the local architects and the banks, to negotiate delivery of the project".

#### International spokesperson

By getting involved in almost every element of delivering projects in Marbella, Lawson has dealt with the region's key decision makers. "I've spent a lot of time in Marbella and work with the town hall to assist in their activities in promoting the region and improving its image," he says. "The Mayoress asked me to become an unofficial ambassador for the city when I speak at international events, and I work closely with the

tourism council.

"The new urban plan will set into law how Marbella will operate, and it should be approved between March and June this year. There is still scepticism because the plan was drawn-up by the Seville regional government, not the town hall (that normally oversees such plans). However, the Mayor is willing to accept it and wants to pass it into law."

As part of his work with the Marbella Town Hall to promote a more positive image of the region, he is a member of several professional organisations. These include: AEDIP (Association for Project Management in Spain) of which he is a board member; CIOB (Chartered Institute of Building), RICS (Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors) and APM (Association of Project Management) to name a few, through which he raises the profile of the Spanish construction industry.

He was also one of the panellists debating 'The Future of the Spanish Costas' at OPPLive 08 in November.

Lawson therefore takes his role as 'unofficial ambassador' very seriously. "I had an argument with

networks over the next few years than anywhere else in Europe. Nonetheless, he also admits that some key things could be better.

"The legal system is creaky and it can take a long time to get things

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a taxi driver in Britain recently when I mentioned I had flown over from Marbella as he was saying that bulldozers were demolishing British-owned villas in the city – but nothing could be further from the truth. Because of this image, I really aim to convey a message of calm; that there isn't anything untoward happening in Marbella. In fact, the previous problems Marbella had means it will be one of the first towns on the coast to have a new legal system in place".

Lawson is keen to emphasise the quality of Spain's infrastructure, and the fact that it will have more kilometres of high-speed train

resolved," he says. "Mistakes have been made in the new laws that require developers to set aside 30% of their land for social housing. This will actually work to deter some developers because they won't want to create luxury resorts that include social housing elements. So, for me, that law has to change because it really won't have the desired effect".

Concluding on a more positive note for the future of Spain, Lawson adds: "The supply of cheap and cheerful product won't be the same in the future – developers will build better and there will be improvements in construction and the attractiveness of projects." **opp**

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