

A Journey through la Barceloneta: Neighbours and the Changing Cultural Identity of Barcelona's Beach Suburb

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Abstract

This paper explores the shifting urban and cultural transformation of one of Barcelona's most iconic suburbs: la Barceloneta. Targeted by mass tourism, real estate speculation and measures allowing for the privatization of public space, this seaside neighbourhood risks becoming one more example of the historic city reduced to a mere exhibition to be visited, not lived in (Lefebvre, 1969). This has sparked a heated debate between different agents about who benefits from such changes considering that the atmosphere of a city is a collective work of its dwellers, from which some make a profit. At the same time, la Barceloneta has remained a working-class area with a strong sense of place identity, moving residents to take collective action against policies which often ignore their complex social realities and affective entanglements and also erode the historic heritage of the neighbourhood.

Understanding urban space as “a meeting place of jostling, potentially conflicting, trajectories” (Massey, 2007, p. 89), I will draw on a plurality of voices from which the neighbourhood is being imagined: from media narratives that fix its meaning in order to market it, to neighbours’ lived experiences, to actions organized by urban social movements to claim the right to the city. This exposes the contradictions between the suburb as represented, promoted and visited and the suburb as inhabited. I argue that local contests over suburbs like la Barceloneta matter because progressive place-based politics can expose how deep socioeconomic transformations are made under the guise of urban restructuring and service-oriented cities.

Keywords: la Barceloneta, urban transformation, neighbourhood movements, gentrification, waterfront development

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My paper will explore tensions between various agents regarding the urban and cultural transformation of la Barceloneta, the beach suburb of Barcelona. La Barceloneta was once a fishing and industrial suburb isolated from the rest of the city and crammed with tiny apartments and shacks on its beach, but during the last decades it has been targeted by mass tourism, real estate speculation, gentrification and measures allowing for the privatization of public space. This is dangerously weakening the urban social fabric of the neighbourhood to the extent that it could become an example of Henri Lefebvre's (1969) warning about the historic city which is no longer lived in but only remains as an object of cultural consumption for tourism and for aestheticism, eager for spectacle and the picturesque (p. 124). Here I would like to show collective action against policies which deny the right to the city and the historic heritage of a working-class neighbourhood.

Following the work of the late Doreen Massey (2007), I understand urban space as "a multiplicity riven with tensions...a meeting place of jostling, potentially conflicting, trajectories" (p. 89). Contrary to narratives that claim a harmonic, embellished interpretation of urban space, the suburb does not have a single coherent identity but is instead constituted through multiple social interactions that occur there and with elsewhere. Once place identity is conceived as fractured and heterogeneous, Massey (2007) argues that "[s]uch an understanding of place requires that conflicts are recognized, that positions are taken and that (political) choices are made" (p. 89). I will therefore present la Barceloneta as a field in which multiple actors and narratives converge and collide. I am especially interested in residents' complex social realities, sensual experiences, memories attached to the suburb and their resistances, all of which are too often ignored by projects of urban transformation.

I take this as a departure point to reflect on the contradictions between the suburb as represented, promoted and visited and the suburb as inhabited. There is an abysmal contrast between the hygienized version of la Barceloneta that advertisements and some official histories present and the hard experiences of many residents who suffer from mobbing, high rents, privatization of public space or mobility problems. Thinking alongside David Harvey (2012) that "[t]he ambience and attractiveness of a city...is a collective product of its citizens, but it is the tourist trade that commercially capitalizes upon that common to extract monopoly rents" (p. 74), opens to question whose benefits are to be prioritized (p. 106). As seen in Figure 1, neighbourhood movements in la Barceloneta are defending what Henri Lefebvre (1969) conceptualised as "the right to the city", that is, the collective right to a city which is understood as collectively built by its dwellers through participation and appropriation and in which the use value is prioritized above the economic value (pp. 138, 159).



Figure 1: Residents protest against housing speculation. ©Sílvia Juventeny, 2016.

La Barceloneta sits on a peninsula with a strategic location being Barcelona's gate to the sea. Mercè Tatjer (1973), in her exhaustive work about the origins and development of the suburb, explains that la Barceloneta was built outside the city's walls in the mid 18th century to respond to the demographic and economic expansion of Barcelona, and it also served to accommodate those who lost their homes to the construction of the Citadel (pp. 37-9). The suburb was designed by military authorities as a uniform grid to be easily controlled, with narrow streets to squeeze as many buildings as possible, and only ground-floor houses to permit the vigilance from the city over the sea. Tatjer explains that before the suburb was built, there were huts and warehouses for fishers on its beach and the area already had strong links with port activities (p. 39). The first residents of la Barceloneta were fishers and workers in sea-related trades who extended their working practices to the streets due to the lack of indoor space. And as place is, in Jody Berland's (2005) words, "the outcome of social practice" (p. 258), the habits of dwellers and in particular their appropriation of public space deeply shaped the suburb. Residents filled the streets and contributed to build an identity tightened up to sea activities.

Another interesting element which contributed to build urban life in the suburb was its quintessential balconies with hanging clothes, illustrated in Figure 2. As a neighbour explains in a documentary, the fact that flats have no interior yard so that residents must dry clothes on street balconies together with the narrowness of the streets encourages neighbours to talk to each other from their balconies (Televisió de Catalunya, 2012, 26:45). Another resident proudly adds that this does not happen in the upper parts of the city where at the most one knows the neighbour next door, whereas she claims that in la Barceloneta they live on the streets (Televisió de Catalunya, 2012, 30:15). Arturo San Agustín (2016) summarizes this best in a book of memories as a long-term resident, arguing that when the house is too small, the corner and the balcony flourish and the neighbourhood is born (p. 30). What's more, San Agustín reveals that neighbours guessed who lived in a flat and how much money they had just by looking at the clothes on their balcony (p. 30). Yet such social practices of locals are exploited by tourist narratives for commercial purposes. It is

rather ironic that the official websites of Barcelona Tourism and the Catalan Tourist Board encourage visiting the suburb arguing that its balconies are icons which have appeared in many films (Agència Catalana de Turisme, n.d.; Turisme de Barcelona, n.d.b), when in reality the immense tourist and real estate pressure is forcing many neighbours and their ways of life out from the suburb. La Barceloneta is today the suburb of Barcelona with the most expensive average rent per square metre and there is a growing tendency to seasonal rentals instead of longer rentals (Benvenut, 2016). Hence the expulsion of many long-term residents with low incomes.



Figure 2: Narrow streets and balconies in la Barceloneta. ©Sílvia Juventeny, 2016.

Already back in the 1960s around 20,000 residents of the area were expelled with the demolition of Somorrostro, the shanty town on the suburb's beach. According to the well-known work of Jaume Fabre and Josep Maria Huertas Clavería (1977), the first shacks were built mostly by Romani people, and later on by migrants from southern Spain who moved to Barcelona in the mid 20th century looking for work in the nearby factories (pp. 99-106). In a documentary that brings to light the history of Barcelona's shanty towns through personal stories, a neighbour complains that the people in power ignored Somorrostro and no one ever went there to inaugurate anything because they did not bother anyone and the place was another world (Televisió de Catalunya & Carnicer & Grimal, 2010, 36:40). The oblivion has lingered on as young generations are not aware of its existence. As Massey (1994b) asserts, the past identity of a place has to be constructed, and how we do that is a political act with the potential to transform the present (p. 171). One of the lessons to learn from the demolition of Somorrostro is that forcing impoverished people to the outskirts of Barcelona was also a way to clear a very attractive and lucrative part of the city: the beach.

Besides the obvious profit-making intentions, pushing out certain social strata of the suburb is also a way to dispel the possibility of a strong urban social movement that reclaims the neighbourhood for everyone. It is a means to dissipate social conflict. As Henri Lefebvre (1969) argued, agitation is at the core of urban life, which is why the great economic powers are interested in reducing many historic cities to mere

exhibitions to be visited, not lived in (pp. 99, 124). Many residents in la Barceloneta are rebelling against this, thanks to a long history of associative tradition. This is a working-class suburb that grew immensely with the industrialization of the 19th century, when many factories settled there looking to establish themselves in the margins of the city and close to the harbour (Ubero, 1994, p. 18). This caused a disproportionate need for accommodation for blue-collar workers, so more floors were added to houses and each floor was divided in half. This resulted in 30m² units famously called “quarts de casa” (quarters of house), which are the most common flats still found today. As the testimony of a resident argues in San Agustín’s (2016) book, living in such reduced spaces can generate conflicts but also ties (p. 62). The high density of population intensified the relations between residents of similar social interests, which led them to form associations and cooperatives to provide for each other and to take collective action against plans of privatization of public soil.

However, this social mobilization has been threatened by a series of urban interventions which since the 1980s have transformed Barcelona from a city of industry to one of services under what’s been called the “Barcelona model”. In a highly recommended book, the anthropologist Manuel Delgado (2010) argues that what has been described as a series of major top-down urban transformations supposedly aimed at building an attractive city through harmonic development and growth, in reality it has meant the conversion of Barcelona into a commercial product to be promoted and consumed with the additional intention of monitoring what goes on in urban space (pp. 13, 17, 38). As Delgado puts it, it has been a project for the market rather than a project for coexistence (p. 16). This is not to deny that residents have benefited from some needed urban interventions, but there have been too many urban projects designed to benefit the financial interests of a minority, which residents in la Barceloneta have tirelessly opposed.

As an example, the popular seafront restaurants and public baths on the beach were pulled down and the seafront promenade and the harbour were redeveloped in the 1980s and 1990s following the city council’s projects to prepare for the 1992 Olympics. The official narrative insists that it was “a major clean up” for the city to “gain” visibility and access to the sea (Turisme de Barcelona, n.d.b) or, as the title of a book published by the Port Authority announced, Barcelona opened to the sea (*Port Vell*, 1992), but to many residents of la Barceloneta it meant the destruction of an atmosphere. It put an end to the bazaar of smells and flavours coming from the seafront restaurants that San Agustín recalls (2016, p. 100), and the area surrounding the harbour lost its industrial heritage to become a temple for leisure and tourism. Official publications by the City Council argue that a spectacular urban transformation changed the coastline of Barcelona from being a seriously depressed area to an urban landscape of sea and beaches, mainly devoted to leisure and culture (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2005, p. 28). The recurrent official argument that Barcelona benefitted from opening itself to the sea is problematic first because it ignores the close tie with the sea of the people who lived in la Barceloneta and the shanty towns on the beach before that, and second because the latest urban measures have tended to privatize and restrict access to the sea rather than allowed it.

The neighbourhood association *Associació de veïns l’Ostia* has been one of the associations which has more actively denounced that the waterfront development operations have resulted in less public access to the sea and many more barriers and

visual obstacles. The building of the W Hotel and the restructuring of the harbour only a few years ago illustrate these claims. The luxurious W hotel, built at one end of the suburb's beach and only 20 metres away from the sea, caused an enormous impact on the seascape and the horizon, does not comply with the Coastal Law and promotes la Barceloneta as a tourist destination, thus raising the prices of real estate. Because of all this, a strong urban social movement fiercely opposed the building of the W Hotel through creative collective actions such as a catchy YouTube song (Noalhotelvela, 2009).

Neighbour platforms took to the streets again in 2012 against the redeveloping of the Port Vell harbour. In street protests and in a manifesto, they condemned the socio-environmental impact of reforming the docks to accommodate large numbers of luxurious yachts and of building security barriers for them. Blocking public access to the harbour and views to the sea would alter the maritime culture of the suburb. Neighbours themselves even made a documentary to raise awareness of the need to defend the suburb from such projects (Maragda Produccions & Mora & Ràfols, 2012). A recurrent argument expressed in the documentary is that the suburb is made by people and that residents are an important part of it, which is why they reject urban interventions that disregard them. Indeed, as David Harvey (2012) claims, “[t]hrough their daily activities and struggles, individuals and social groups create the social world of the city, and thereby create something common as a framework within which all can dwell” (p. 74). However, more often than not this is dismissed by authorities, as with the redeveloping of the harbour, which proceeded despite all the social mobilization. As Figure 3 demonstrates, the result is that now that part of the sea is almost invisible from public space, yachts have taken the space of the shrinking fishing fleet, on which many residents' jobs depended, and the ecosystem has been disrupted. The exclusive One Ocean's Club, located there, confirms that this is an elitist harbour, where only some have the right to access it. Its website advertises “Our exclusive private members' club at OneOcean Port Vell” and “One of the largest superyachts marinas in the Mediterranean” (OneOcean Port Vell, n.d.).

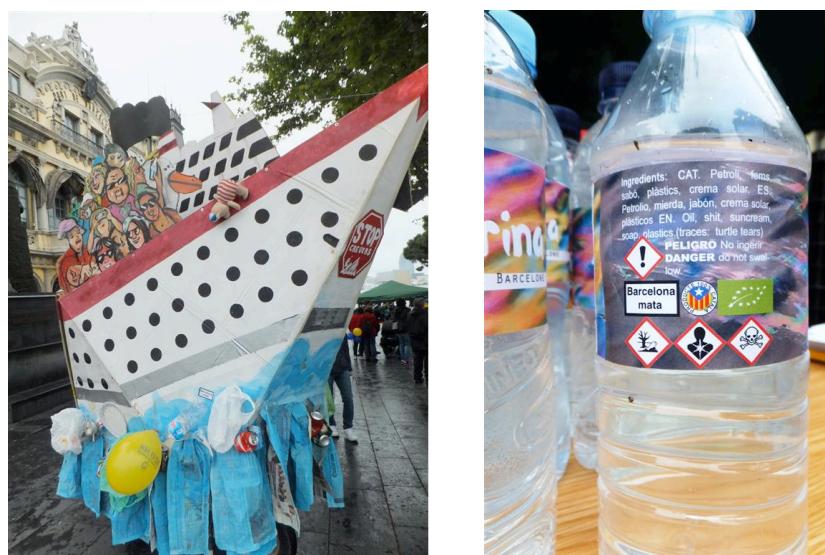


Figure 3: The result of the restructuring of Port Vell. ©Silvia Juventeny, 2016.

Such waterfront developments have contributed to the boom of tourist apartments, most of them without a licence, and to the rocketing of property price in la Barceloneta. Neighbourhood associations have been actively campaigning against this

and for the social value of the suburb, denouncing that the market place and corporate and institutional actors only favour its economic value. Such disagreements are not surprising as Massey (1994a) claims that places are full of internal conflicts (p. 155), but the worrying part is the extent to which these tensions are threatening the urban social fabric of la Barceloneta. Many residents have left and those who stayed complain about life being unsustainable. Amongst their demands in the latest Municipal Action Programme, they ask the City Council to take action against the excess of bar terraces and segways, the congestion of public space, the high numbers of illegal tourist apartments or the privatization of the harbour (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2016).

Residents had already opened some of these issues to debate in a more creative fashion when they filmed a video in which they went out onto the suburb's streets asking neighbours to write what they wanted the place to be like and projecting the written requests onto street buildings (Barceloneta, 2011). They address Massey's (2007) urge to ask what a place stands for, a question that "makes each and every place a potential arena for political contest" (p. 10). In another video also dedicated to neighbourhood struggles, the recurrent claim is that they aspire to a self-managed space that takes care of the material and immaterial heritage of la Barceloneta (Maragda Produccions & Mora & Ràfols, 2012, 3:53). To this end, they are now reclaiming an old historic building of a workers' cooperative for public use. They are also actively campaigning against the socio-environmental impact of the soaring number of cruisers. Figures 4 and 5 show a protest in which various collectives denounced that up to 28,000 cruisers disembarking on a single day has a major impact on water and air pollution, over crowds nearby areas like la Barceloneta and causes major mobility problems.



Figures 4 and 5: Satires of a cruise and of a bottle of polluted sea water at a protest against cruises. ©Sílvia Juventeny, 2016.

Yet demands like these are not seriously taken into account by projects of urban transformation of the suburb. Instead, the previous mayor of Barcelona declared that la Barceloneta had lived complicated moments of change, but had overcome all of them looking towards the future without losing its own individual character (Trias,

2014, pp. 12-13). This seems to suggest that any tension will eventually be swallowed by the suburb without much resistance and it also presupposes that the suburb has a harmonic essence. This is far from understanding places as incoherent, dynamic and with multiple imagined identities (Massey, 1994a, p. 153).

Tourism also fixes the meaning of la Barceloneta to market it and presents an image of the suburb as cool to garner great profits. Edward Bruner (2005) asserts that narratives of tourism brand a product and sell an experience (p. 22). Thus, Barcelona Tourism invites you to experience “the *charm* [emphasis added] and atmosphere of a working-class district” (Turisme de Barcelona, n.d.c) and “a world of *modest* [emphasis added] buildings” (Turisme de Barcelona, n.d.b). While media like *The Observer* disregard la Barceloneta’s working-class origins as “previously unprepossessing” to praise its new “luxurious” makeup with “stylish” beaches (Fiegel, 2008); or the *Bangkok Post* presents it as a “neglected district” reborn through a “beauty treatment” (Simonis, 2009). Even sensual experiences are marketed, as Barcelona Tourism promises visitors to be taken by the smell of the sea, the chatter and noise, the rich visual stimuli, the tactile rub of the sand, or the taste of seafood (Turisme de Barcelona, n.d.b). Such impressions can be far from the variety of affective investments of locals to the place, as a resident in a documentary complains that the suburb now smells of nothing, whereas years ago it smelt of fish, algae and salt (Televisió de Catalunya, 2012, 18:45). To another neighbour, the suburb still transports her to the horrible stink of waste from factories that used to be there (Televisió de Catalunya & Carnicer & Grimal, 2010, 23:15). Thus, each person brings her own meanings to the place, which reflects heterogeneity (Massey, 1994a, p. 153).

Narratives of tourism also insist on a supposed authenticity which in fact they construct. Barcelona Tourism promises to visitors that la Barceloneta is “Barcelona’s classic neighbourhood by the sea, where the people of Barcelona love to come and eat fish, seafood and tapas” (Turisme de Barcelona, n.d.b). It seems that markets, restaurants, houses, beaches, balconies and streets in la Barceloneta are showcases for tourists, and even residents do not figure here but as part of an “authentic” decor. Hence Meaghan Morris’s (1995) concern about the impact that the production of tourist places has on human communities who live there and who become tourist objects under the tourist gaze (p. 178). For example, Barcelona Tourism promises “the traditional images of locals sitting in their chairs in the street” (Turisme de Barcelona, n.d.b). And although one may still see that today, it may be for curious subversive reasons. A flâneur-neighbour explains in a documentary that he takes his chair out onto the street to watch the passers-by, a practice which he enjoys and also allows him to begin conversations (Televisió de Catalunya, 2012, 30:55).

With the examples above, I have sought to present a general overview of some of the forces at play that have shaped and are shaping la Barceloneta in different and often conflictive directions. There are certainly many suburbs around the world immersed in similar tensions and that is why I would like to stress the value of those neighbourhood movements that campaign around place opening new possibilities for progressive politics by claiming the city as a collective work and thus demanding the right to conceive the past, present and future development of the suburb. The neighbourhood struggles I have discussed do not depart from a reactionary localism, but instead denounce urban projects, policies and narratives that impose fixed meanings on the suburb, turn it into a product to consume and prioritize profit at the

cost of people living there. This is a situation that many suburbs face across the world, and I argue that local contests over suburbs like la Barceloneta matter precisely because the global is grounded, produced in the local, and progressive place-based politics can expose how deep socioeconomic transformations are made under the guise of urban restructuring and service-oriented cities.

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