

**CUA Annual Conference: *Market vs Society? Human principles and economic rationale in changing times***

**Paper: “An anthropological approach on the neighbourhood resistance against the capitalist appropriation of the city: A case in the city of Barcelona”**

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**Introduction**

In this paper I will present some results and reflections of a recent research, specifically, my Master dissertation in Anthropology at the University of Barcelona, which I am now continuing in the doctoral thesis.

My research topic, since the degree, is the social impact of urban transformation plans. In my Master thesis I focused it on a neighborhood movement to a Quarter of Barcelona, a paradigmatic city in planned urban transformations, to the extent that it speaks of the "Barcelona Model". I wanted to study the subject to research in a neighborhood movement to focus it from the active and organized citizen response in resistance against the urban plans that are being implemented, and, above all, against this model of city driven by local government and capitalist power, considered by the neighbors organized as more harmful than beneficial for the local population involved.

The research was aimed to address anthropologically the construction of the resistance movement of the residents of the Barceloneta, created to cope with urban plans implemented in the neighborhood by the City Hall. This subject is part of the process of planned urban transformation that is taking place now in this neighborhood and in Barcelona city.

As specific objectives, on one hand it was inquire the strategies that are taking place in the neighborhood against to the urban plans designed by the City Council, especially those generated from the neighborhood movement constituted by the Association of Veïns de l'Ostia and Affected Platform in Defense of the Barceloneta. In this direction

have been investigated different elements of the process of opposition or resistance, such as problems-and possible solutions- identified by the organized neighbors, their actions and forms of organization.

On the other hand, to have an analytical approach on social dynamics resulting from this process of transformation and resistance: the links that are established, relationships that appear, disappear or are transformed.

Specific issues arise from the central question about the social impact of urban planning:

- How is it organize a neighborhood movement against urban plans?
- Through which claims, which discourses, what strategies, which types of internal organization, which alliances?
- Which are the movement concerns and its fronts of struggle?
- In what way this style and format of neighborhood struggle can and should be compared with other phases of capitalist appropriation of the city?

### **Starting points**

Capitalism is expressed in a constant series of crises of accumulation models and restructurings that lead to new phases of accumulation. During the 60's and the 70's of the XXth Century one of these crises took place and the exit was the creation of Global Economics, World Economics, Globalization or Neoliberalism. This would lead to diverse ways of capital organization in space and its entering the market as a commodity. Urban space is not simply the locus where production process takes place, but is now produced itself, thereby acquiring the double function as a resource for production as well as an effect or product of it. In this urban transformation for adjusting the city to accumulation processes, which extends geographically in Globalization, the State plays an important role by undertaking the creation of the necessary conditions for the realization of the accumulation process. There is a contradiction between urban space as a place for practices, uses and social achievements, and urban space as a commodity, conceived and used to obtain capital

gain. The new capitalist configuration tries to subordinate the use of space to the requirements of its exchange value.

In the above process of economic restructuring for the creation of new opportunities of capital gain through space, a process of unequal differentiation takes place, peculiar to capitalism, in which places are devaluated and revaluated in order to make a profit in a process of destruction and reconstruction, or 'creative destruction': "*...applied to space, it designates the ceaseless labor for which the places are simultaneously destroyed and created (devaluated and revaluated) in order to make profit. In other words, certain processes are required to destroy the value in order to create the opportunity of profit obtained by its revaluation*" (Schumpeter, 1962; in Franquesa, 2007). For make possible this cycle of destruction and creation of value, it is necessary a process of emptying and filling, i.e. of replacement of poor population by rich population (known as gentrification). This produces Real Estate capital gains, when are found buyers who are capable to pay more than the former dwellers. There, a differential value is created.

As for the management of space, the new model has led to new forms of intervention. The private sectors require large investments that do not find it profitable to undertake alone, and therefore call for a broad state participation in urban projects, which are focused toward their interests. It then creates public-private corporations that serve as mediators for the final privately owned spaces. The State also intervenes to change the legal framework of urban planning, making it "flexible" to respond to private interests over certain areas, while maintaining hierarchical decision to leave out sectors and social groups. In the creative destruction of the environment "*States construct, encode and order in discourse the meaning of the place, through policies and practices that are often advantageous for capital*" (Weber, 2002, cited in Franquesa, op cit.).

In this perspective, the urban planning can be characterized as "*the set of knowledge, practices, and discourses organized from institutions of power that organizes the geography of the capital, giving mobility to space and ensuring its condition as a commodity*", and the proliferation of urban regeneration projects is one of the clearest manifestations of the use of strategies to confer this character to space and create opportunities of surplus value (Franquesa, 2007: 125).

Urban practices lead to a very important issue: gentrification. Urban planning typified as regeneration, revitalization, renovation, rescue, etc., generally involve gentrifiers processes.

The term gentrification has been used to describe many of the widespread phenomenon of the new phase of capitalism, although is not a new concept. The term was coined in 1964 by sociologist Ruth Glass, about what was happening at that time in London. Sergi Martínez i Rigol made a theoretical overview of most representative authors and perspectives of this concept. He explains the gentrification as a transformation, both social and morphological, of certain areas of the cities. The transformation processes that are defined as gentrification have in common the following elements:

- The population with few economic and cultural resources is expelled and substituted by a new population with more resources of this type.
- The old and degraded homes are rehabilitated or renewed.
- New commercial sites, restaurants, art galleries and bars replace the traditional trade directed to the subsistence of the former residents.
- The public space is renewed and protected of activities considered "undesirable" (Martínez i Rigol, 2005).

Today, gentrification as a process and category is still debated, but continues to have relevance to describing urban processes that are occurring in an increasingly widespread way at global scale as part of the globalization of capitalism.

### **Barcelona and capitalist dynamics**

In the city of Barcelona, capitalist restructuring has been expressed in many different areas. But surely, its appointment in October 1986 as the future site of the Olympic Games, to be held in 1992, marks the completion of the largest project of transforming the city in its recent history. Billions were expended in public works to remodel urban space, transport infrastructure and telecommunications, to meeting the indispensable functionality requirements for capital and turn Barcelona into an "informational metropolis" (Fernández Durán; 1996; Maldo; 2004).

The urban planning instrument for implementing the restructuring, the so called "Strategic Economic and Social Plan of Barcelona 2000", was created with the aim of managing large operations in the city. One of its effects was the rising of economic inequalities and commercialized services, and the increase of police enforcement. The plan, alongside what was called the 'Barcelona Model', appeared to be based on the centrality of the citizens, that is, taking precedence over business, but actually it understands the city as a business sphere. This model was sponsored by public and private instances, and headed to transform Barcelona in a 'Global City' (Maldo, 2004).

Under the plan, two major urban projects were the renovation of the old port of Barcelona and the waterfront of the city. The first is related to changes in port infrastructure, and the second with the existence of a broad spectrum of industries in coastal position. The waterfront was a conflicting area for some time regarding previous projects like the Plan de la Ribera, which then influenced the design of the Olympic Village (Capel, 2005). As part of the Olympics, the location of the Olympic Village "*is integrated as part of recovery processes of the seaboard, opening to the sea*" (Capel, 2005.14-15).

### **The Barceloneta: The Lift Plan and the neighborhood movement**

The Barceloneta, a Barcelona seaside neighborhood built in the late eighteenth century, throughout its history has been subjected to several urban transformations. In recent decades it can be seen as a paradigmatic neighborhood of this kind of transformations, largely due to its location near to the beach, a space very valued by capitalism in recent times.

The present research work focused on a neighborhood movement in this district of Barcelona, formed by the Neighborhood Association of the Ostia and the Platform of Affected in Defense of the Barceloneta. The election of a neighborhood movement to my study arises from the interest in the social impact of urban transformation plans, from the perspective of the social side that resists or opposes them.

The Neighborhood Association of the Ostia was constituted in 2005, mainly around Emilia Llorca, native resident from the Barceloneta. According to her colleagues from

the association, she had a broad knowledge of the needs of the neighbors, by her own mode of insertion into the social networks of neighborhood, where she had the role of assisting and advising her neighbors in the solution of diverse problems. To have greater legitimacy to the authorities to this effect, she created the association together with her colleagues, mainly fellow women from the Fishermen Street Fiestas Committee. This was established in 1990 for the organization of the festival on that street, and from which Emilia was also one of its founders and its main promoters.

In the neighborhood there was already a neighborhood association, the Neighborhood Association of Barceloneta, created in 1971 (the second to be established in the city), in the context of a sharp conflict over the so-called Plan de la Ribera. According to the Association of the Ostia, by 2005 the historical association was neither close nor functional to the neighbors, so they had the need to create another entity which was more representative of the interests of the neighborhood. Besides that, according to the Ostia, for years the historical association was linked to the interests and dynamics of ‘caciques’ in the Barceloneta.

In 2004, a year before the creation of the Ostia, the collective Miles de Viviendas (Thousands of Housing) squats a building, abandoned for almost ten years, in Paseo Joan de Borbó, the street that surrounds part of the neighborhood and reaches the beach.

In April 2005, Barcelona City Council proposed a development plan called "Modification of PGM<sup>1</sup> in the regulation of traditional building of the Barceloneta", whose expressed purpose is "to improve the vertical accessibility of traditional buildings", equipping several of the buildings with lifts, as the official document says. This also called ‘Lift Plan’ (or ‘Elevator Plan’) involves the demolition of several ‘quarters of house’ (flats of 35 to 40 square meters that emerged from the partition of the original homes) and the permanent relocation of the inhabitants of these flats in new constructions to take place near but outside the neighborhood. The City Council ensures that this reform plan is aimed at improving the quality of life for local people to improve the accessibility of their homes, especially in the case of the elderly population, which constitutes about 30% population of the district.

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<sup>1</sup> Metropolitan General Plan.

But for many residents, this is only a pretext to allow entry to private sector, i.e. construction and real estate companies, through public subsidies to make the remodelling of the district and begin a speculative plan with the real goal of transforming the Barceloneta, a popular and traditional neighborhood, into a new district for tourism and people with high purchasing power, where on one side, costs would rise from shops of the neighborhood and, secondly, many people would be forced to leave their homes and settle elsewhere.

The Ostia Association called for a meeting and briefing on the plan at the neighborhood church. The collective of Miles had news thereof and then decided to go some representatives, to engage with the association and the neighborhood issues. At that meeting, which is attended by several dozen people, the association aims to create a platform to fight against the lift plan. Miles not only adds, along with many other neighbors, but the first assembly of the platform is carried out in the squatted building, despite the initial reluctance amongst several neighbors to be linked with the "squatters".

From there on a close relationship was created between Ostia, Miles and neighbors who formed the platform, to the extent that today it is difficult or even unnecessary to distinguish between the latest and the association, as said by the majority of members of the neighborhood movement, and as can be seen in its activities and forms of organization and work, which they carry on together.

The Miles building was vacated and demolished in 2007, but so far many people from the group is linked to the neighborhood movement of the Ostia and the Platform. In fact, after the eviction, a person who was in Miles is seeking to stay in the neighborhood and is today one of the most active of the movement. She tells me that the links between Miles and the association have resulted in a peculiar way of working where are converging old and new ways of conceiving and carrying out the social struggle. This perception is shared by several members of the neighborhood movement.

The Lift Plan was suspended in January 2011, but the neighborhood movement is working with several struggle fronts, which shall relate in the next section. The movement has already four years operating and today is considered one of the most active neighborhood movements in the city of Barcelona.

### **The Barceloneta neighborhood movement. Analysis and reflections**

What I will present below is an ethnographic analysis and conclusions of my research work in the Barceloneta neighborhood movement, which, as I mentioned, currently ongoing in my doctoral thesis.

Within the organization and internal dynamics, the movement has a weekly assembly with a regular attendance of between 15 and 20 people each time. There is an agenda, usually conducted by one of the most active persons in the movement, who belonged to the squatter collective. Tasks are distributed according to the things to do. The meetings are open to any resident (in fact, in every published newsletter they are invited to attend.) The association as such opens twice a week. Several Saturdays a month they meet in the market place to install an "information point" where are distributed newsletters or flyers about their demands and actions.

The movement has several diffusion media and organs of its objectives and activities, both print and electronic. As print media own, we mentioned both monthly newsletters and briefing notes, and other brochures or posters elaborated to inform, advertise, or call for any particular event or situation. Also published in the journal notes of the district (which publishes monthly a neighbor) and an independent newspaper in the district of Ciutat Vella to which it belongs the Barceloneta. As electronic media, I mention their blog on the Internet, where they publish all the newsletters, posters, brochures printed and then distributed, and where also publishes news, notes, newspapers, photographs and texts related to the issues that the movement is working. As electronic media, I mention their blog in the Internet, where they publish all the newsletters, posters, brochures, that they then print and distribute, and where also they publish news, notes, newspapers, photographs and texts related to the issues that the movement is working. Other electronic media are the accounts of Facebook, the popular social networking site,



opened for each of the activities they are carrying out, for example, the campaign for the recovery of the building of an old cooperative for the use of the neighbors.

The movement is currently fighting at several fronts; all aimed at what it means to them that the neighborhood is more focused on the neighbors --not to tourists or speculators-- and is qualified to meet all their needs. Under the slogan “We are entitled to the Barceloneta”, several things are claimed: affordable housing, meeting and leisure spaces, affordable sports offer, favorable conditions for education, among others. And of course: “No neighbor outside the neighbourhood”, one of its main demands.

These fronts of struggle derive in turn into fronts of action, which I will explain below in five points:

1. The **festive and vindictive appropriation of public space**. It's like the 'backdrop' of all or most of the claims. They say the lack of space is one of their major topics to work.

With regard to vindictive-festive spatial appropriation, according to my observations I can say that it takes place from:

- Material occupancy (bodies and objects)
- Marks (leave the imprint, the trace. Make an appearance and leave evidence of such presence)
- Acoustic / sound appropriation.
- Occupation from collective action: to claim the space as a meeting and coexistence space, beyond relationships based on money.
- Explicit and written demonstration of the demands of the movement: banners, posters.
- Material occupation from a theming of the body: dress, marks, costumes.

Speaking of activities that involve an appropriation both festive and vindictive of space, it is emphasized the event that neighborhood movement does each year to demand the cancellation of the plan of the elevators. The plan was already suspended at the beginning of this year, but it is writing a new urban plan for the neighborhood. Therefore, in the last manifestation the movement marched with slogans like: "We want

to get to the end: we decide our future, we want a new plan made by the neighbors. No neighbor out of the neighborhood and no plan without the neighbors. In the Barceloneta we want to get to the end: we will not allow the impunity of businessmen, bosses and corrupt politicians".

Within this kind of activities in the public space also it is worth mentioning those events that involve the organization of popular meals such as 'butifarrada', snacks, or paella open to all public free of charge. These meals are done with concerts, screening of videos alluding to the demands of the movement, etc., as part of the same event dedicated to a particular issue.

The relationship between the appropriation and festive vindication of space is a very interesting link already discussed a theoretical level and in other studies. In this sense, I think it is no coincidence that the association of Ostia was born from the Fiestas Committee of Fishermen Street. The Fiestas Committee also makes popular 'butifarrada', 'sardinada', 'chocolatada'. This way of appropriating space means vindicate it as somewhat which has to be lived by the neighborhood people and should not become a commodity or a business. That is the idea that I consider that may be central.

Whenever there is a vindication we talk about a political issue because it relates to the intention to subvert the correlation of forces with respect to a resource or a power field. The festive appropriating of the space can imply a political question. When it sees that the public space is threatened of becoming a commodity, we can say that any appropriation claiming it as a space that must be appropriated by the local people is already a political issue. When the government tends to promote urban projects hand by hand with enterprises and the capitalist powers to turn the city in a business, any Appropriation of the space which claims the right to use it without paying for it already is political, because it is against this city model.

2. The **juridical or legal action**. There would be talking, for example, about the filing of contentious administrative remedies in relation to urban planning as the plan of the lifts. It means in the legal level that any citizen, any entity or group or person as a legal entity, demands that a certain legal process be stopped or abandoned.

3. The third point is the **dissemination of information** and call for their activities. This is another important framework for action: to know which are these claims, fronts of struggle, and what activities they are doing to involve the people to participate and propose in it.

4. Another front of action is the **generation and promotion of alternative proposals** to the local government about neighborhood issues.

5. The last point of the fronts of action is the **functions as neighborhood association**, in a particular time and place: Tuesday and Thursday, Fishermen Street # 49, 6 to 8 pm. That's when the problems are attended from people of the neighborhood, such as counseling and assistance on legal processes. In this direction, without being specialists, the neighbors of the movement have been informing themselves and acquiring experience, enabling them to be aware of the steps to follow on the juridical processes.

Among the **strategies** of the movement, organized neighbors of the Barceloneta talk a lot about 'going out', "take the streets", which can have several meanings: to know and link with the neighbors, knit social networks with the other, learn about the life of the neighborhood and its dynamics, become visible and audible in space, and use urban space as a way to claim it for the neighborhood needs. It is both struggle banner and strategy.

From within the movement, what is under **discussion, debate or question**?

- What should be the role of a neighborhood association and a neighborhood movement?
- What conditions do they face compared to other historical moments of the society, of the city, other political contexts and moments in the life of the members of the movement?
- And in that sense, what should they do as a group of people who join for reasons - more or less- shared, for things that concern them?

One question that arises is about **the 'new' and the 'old' in neighborhood movements**, as it is viewed from the standpoint of the movement of the Barceloneta. Among the elements considered as new, i.e. something that didn't exist decades ago at the start of the neighborhood movements in the city, we can point out:

- One of the greatest current challenges is to work with the widespread individualism in society. In this sense, how to 'reach' the neighbors (in terms of information, and arouse interest in topics addressed, participation, call) is a concern shared by members of the movement.
- The use of new technological tools like the Internet and media to allow the wide dissemination of its objectives, establish links with other residents and collectives, call to its activities and develop visual materials that are helpful to give visibility to the movement.
- Links to forms of collective struggle not previously known, as the squatter movement.

The 'old' elements can include old dilemmas and proven efficacy strategies:

- The partnership links established with other groups or movements, in terms of support, collaboration, feedback, sharing information on strategies and forms of action under the proverbial motto "unity is strength."
- The "taking" of the streets. Is an old form of political manifestation. The new element could be some of the ways of taking this public space: marks, activities, uses. That's where it can be novelty, inventiveness, but also are used proven methods to be present in space.
- The proposal of alternative plans to the proposed-imposed ones from the spheres of power. The first impact of this is the configuration of a collective and active subject in the sense that it is propositive, able to imagine and create possible horizons from their own needs, desires and experiences.

This configuration of the active subject is one of the aspects that seem more relevant to the study of social movements, in the sense that the effects of urban plans are not only endured or resentful, but also fought and replicated, in a direct and explicit dialogue with their causal agents or executors.

This brings me back to the central question of the work on the social impact of urban transformations. We say that are planned because they are modeled from centers of power. The perspective to look at this transformation is given from the group of neighbors and from how it configures and claims its position as a valid, critical and rebellious speaker in face of these space modeling centers.

This active subject, being collective, in turn is composed of many individual desires, needs and interests. It is interesting to see how they combine to create or achieve joint actions and then reach common goals, and see through what kind of negotiations, amalgams, exchanges of information, staging of resources, discussion dynamics, revision and analysis of strategies, these actions are carried out.

Returning to the time axis, from the analysis of capitalist economic and social context the question arises: which things are the movements facing now compared to the past? Which has changed about the things that are opposed: the forms, content and intensity of their expression and their effects? The problematization of these issues may contribute to the construction of social movements and its analysis in the current context. What is to be taken up again and what has to reinvent?

Another key factor in the analysis of social movements is what they identify as problems to solve or fight, and their causes, and how they do, through which strategies, tools and mechanisms that go on one hand directing the action and, on the other, constructing their way of being together on the everyday.

A very important point in this neighborhood movement is **visibility**, resulting in several ways. For example, the possibility of disseminating and call its activities through a blog, or practice of festive and vindictive appropriation of urban space. This topic is related, on the one hand, with the concern to make explicit the problems they are dealing with, and secondly, their own visibility as a movement in terms of dissemination of the actions and proposals they have. Their presence in space is part of that visibility, but its effects go beyond the simple act of presence: involves taking a geographical and symbolical position about what is space and how it should be used or appropriated, for whom, and through which mechanisms.

The Barceloneta neighborhood can be considered a paradigm of urban change, in turn located in a district and a city also paradigmatic in this regard. And in that sense we can say that the movement of the Barceloneta fits perfectly as an opponent of the new forms of capitalist appropriation of the city. First, it recognizes them as a problem and in this sense as a battleground. Maybe it could be called "movement against gentrification", as have been called the movements in other cities that are facing similar situations and processes, or rather, completely related.

In this sense, an aspect that I want to emphasize in this research on the movement of the Barceloneta is the importance of the appropriation of space as a protest strategy, and, in turn, its relevance in a system that is increasingly configured in relation to the commercialization of space.

Given the current outlook, we should ask concerning the social movements of now: Do they have to be flexible and adaptive as the economy? A fundamental question in this research is on neighborhood movements in the post-Fordist era: Which kind of mobilization is given against the current forms of capitalist appropriation of the city? In this context of analysis, how much has capitalism changed in recent decades? What functioned in the past to oppose to its mechanisms and ways of manifesting? What will function now? From where is it subverted as a system? Which are its weaknesses as a logic that shapes relationships, spaces, symbols and categories about the world, and how is it possible to confront it?

Today we are attending a generalized process of generating cities as a commodity, places that are promoted at touristic and commercial levels and which are designed and transformed from government agencies, most of the time with the participation of enterprises. We are talking about historical centers, traditional neighborhoods, sites with certain peculiarities to which, paradoxically, they are trying to standardize to compete in the marketplace. It seems to me relevant, even urgent, to account for how the inhabitants of the cities live these small and large processes; find out what's happening with the actors, the people who is living large changes for those has not been consulted. I consider important anthropological researching on processes of modeling, use, appropriation of urban space as a configurator of relationships, especially when is imposing globally the gain logic. At this time of crisis and economic restructuring, not

only is produced a restatement in the centers of power but also for those who conceive of urban space -and life itself-, beyond or outside the laws of the market.

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