

# Critical Files

# The Barcelona Model

# 1973-2004

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## **Critical Files The Barcelona Model 1973-2004**

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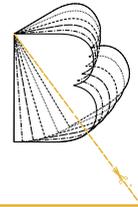
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## Participation and activism: the case of Can Batlló

David de la Peña

### Participation and activism

"Citizen Participation," wrote Sherry Arnstein, "is like eating spinach: no one is against it in principle because it is good for you."<sup>1</sup> Four decades have passed since Arnstein's entreaty, and opinions about participation are still ambivalent. But today, in the context of this cultural moment—of Spain's *indignados*, the Arab Spring, the occupy movement, and the distrust of institutionalized power that they reflect—a new enthusiasm for citizen participation has manifested itself in the planning and design fields, under the banners of design activism, guerilla urbanism and direct citizen action. "Tactical urbanism", as a case in point, has been called the top planning trend of 2011-2012.<sup>2</sup>



Neighbourhood council



Local residents entering Can Batlló

### Official strategies and unofficial tactics

In Barcelona, the case of the conversion of the factory of Can Batlló reflects many of the urban dynamics of the city since the 1970s, and begs this opposition between official city participation and unofficial community activism. To describe these dynamics of participation and activism playing out here and on other sites across the globe, Michel de Certeau's distinction between strategies and tactics is useful. Strategy, he observes, involves spatial actions undertaken by institutional agents with power, while tactics are time-dependent actions of citizens, usually as a means of protest.<sup>3</sup> The relationship between the two is, of course, more complicated than this opposition

<sup>1</sup> Arnstein, S.R. (1969). "A ladder of citizen participation" (Vol. 35): *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*.

<sup>2</sup> Nettler, J. (27 February 2012). "Top Planning Trends of 2011-2012." Planetizen Retrieved March 5, 2012, from <http://www.planetizen.com/node/54838>

<sup>3</sup> Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

suggests, and its contradictions and interdependencies are evident when we look at the roles designers play in the production of this space: as city technicians, private consultants, and community activists. As the motivations and practices of these actors suggest, the ongoing creation of Barcelona has hardly been as monolithic and straightforward as suggested by the term “the Barcelona model”. The so-called model, described by proponents as “participatory” and by critics as “top-down” affords us a view of how planning policy can foster and thwart citizen involvement in the design of cities.

### **Barcelona participates**

“I’m shocked that anyone could think of Barcelona in terms of participation [of] all things!” So recently commented one planning scholar who writes about Barcelona. Hers is not an outlying opinion. The president of one of the most active community centres (and chair of one of the city’s new participatory neighbourhood councils) also complains that the city’s methods “pay lip service to the word participation. They’re just informative processes”.<sup>4</sup>

The city actually talks a lot about participation; it has 30 staff members and two offices dedicated to the topic, and it supports these with an annual budget of around 17 million Euros. It has institutionalized participation through the adoption of numerous laws, norms and rules. And participation’s close sibling, association-membership, is also culturally embedded. Barcelona’s current director of the department of Participation and Association-membership, Carles Agustí, calls it “an intrinsic part of our way of being”.<sup>5</sup>

Under Franco, official citizen participation in Barcelona was unthinkable. Nico Calavita writes that there was a “ruthless rubbing out of any form of public discussion and expression of individual opinions”.<sup>6</sup> Catalan was banned, gatherings of three or more people in public were subject to dispersal, and the city’s parks, plazas and ramblas were left to deteriorate. But this repression also amplified the urge to associate. In the absence of a state or of a government that took care of its community needs, Catalunya’s social structure learned to organize itself.

After the first democratic elections in 1979, participation was one of the first orders of business. The sociologist, geographer and urbanist Jordi Borja worked for the new city administration with a goal of decentralizing power to districts, which required direct citizen participation. In these first years, the city established public councils, information sharing, association support to civic centres, referenda, and the concept of “*autogestió*,” the self-management of community facilities. Through this framework, Borja sought to create “an inevitable tension between direct participation and formal institutionalization”. Participation, he wrote, “opens a dynamic process that permanently questions the established order”.<sup>7</sup>

That “Established order” seemed to appear immediately. In the years that followed, a staggering number of design projects altered Barcelona’s urban fabric and its global appeal. Young graduates of Barcelona’s school of architecture, ETSAB, turned nascent theories of urbanism into practice. International interest skyrocketed following the city’s selection for the 1992 Olympics. Images of urban projects by Miralles, Piñón, Batlle i Roig, and Moneo circulated in schools of architecture and in international journals.

<sup>4</sup> Falcó Gres, J. (2011). Interview. Barcelona.

<sup>5</sup> Agustí Hernández, C. (2012). Interview. Barcelona.

<sup>6</sup> Calavita, N. and Ferrer, A. (2004). “Behind Barcelona’s Success Story-Citizen Movements and Planners’ Power” In Marshall, T. (Ed.), *Transforming Barcelona : the renewal of a European metropolis* (pp. xii, 263 pp.). London ; New York: Routledge.

<sup>7</sup> Borja, J. (1987). *Decentralización y participación ciudadana*. Madrid: Instituto de Estudios de Administración Local.

The questioning of the new urban order was also swift. The novelist Manuel Vázquez Montalbán called the Olympics “a process tailor-made to benefit the wealthiest social classes”.<sup>8</sup> The Federation of residents associations (FAVB) soon began publishing a magazine called *Carrer* (the Street), which consistently questioned the forward march of urban development. The city’s architects had become a new technocracy, managing complex projects with technical skill, but they also seemed to grow distant from the actual needs of communities.<sup>9-10-11</sup> The urban projects of the last two mayors, Joan Clos’s Universal Forum of Cultures and Jordi Hereu’s renewal of the main avenue, Diagonal, are widely viewed as failures, and the city’s participatory processes were blamed for both.

### **Can Batlló**

The former factory of Can Batlló occupies close to 35 acres and 25% of the entire neighbourhood of La Bordeta, one of eight that make up the district of Sants-Montjuïc. Sants, which lies just west of the city centre, has been called “the cradle of the worker’s movement”. It is bisected by the city’s main rail lines and the station, and close to the harbour, meaning that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was a natural location for factories and worker housing. Can Batlló was built in 1880 and was one of the largest factories in the community. In 1943, it was purchased by Julio Muñoz Ramonet, a renowned industrialist with close connections to the Franco regime. Muñoz operated the factory until 1964, then divided it up into 200 smaller workshops, which continued to employ over 2,000 workers. Today, most of the industry has left, but the neighbourhood of La Bordeta, and Sants as a whole, is still decidedly working class with a continuing tendency to self-organize.



Can Batlló, 1912

<sup>8</sup> Vázquez Montalbán, M. (1992). *Barcelonas*. London ; New York: Verso.

<sup>9</sup> Delgado, M. (2007). *La ciudad mentirosa, fraude y miseria del 'modelo barcelona'*. Madrid: Catarata.

<sup>10</sup> Paz Balibrea, M. (2004). “Urbanism, Culture and the Post-Industrial City: Challenging the ‘Barcelona Model’.” In Marshall, T. (Ed.), *Transforming Barcelona: the Renewal of a European Metropolis* (p. xii, 263 pp.). London ; New York: Routledge.

<sup>11</sup> Borja, J. (2009). *Luces y sombras del urbanismo de Barcelona* (1a ed.). Barcelona: Editorial UOC.

In Sants, neighbourhood activism was awakened in the late 1960s, in the context of Franco's *desarrollismo*, "the Spanish miracle", which saw extraordinary urban growth, economic liberalization and the installation of a technocratic government. Throughout Barcelona, massive infrastructure projects were built to support further expansion, including plans to build an expressway through the neighbourhood. Community protest was strong but unable to prevent the an expressway from destroying hundreds of homes and businesses. Through this stirring of citizen unrest, however, association-membership came out into the open. Franco had legalized residents associations in 1964, and slowly they began to emerge from the shadows. The first two residents associations in Sants emerged during the expressway protests, along with the Centre Social de Sants in 1971, whose first major event was an exhibition of drawings called "Cop d'ull a Sants", that highlighted poor neighbourhood conditions. In the exhibit, organizers proposed the "conversion of industrial land into public spaces like Can Batlló and España Industrial, to install the services demanded".<sup>12</sup>



Neighbourhood protest, 1976



Beginnings of the Centre Social de Sants

In 1974, the city set out to draft the PGM, a revision of the regional general plan. To do so, it invited public input, and received 32,000 comments; half of these originated in the district of Sants. The plan curtailed private development on public open space and systematically laid out projects to benefit existing communities. In Sants, this pressure resulted in the designation of several new community public spaces: the Plaça de Sants, a civic centre, and three disused industrial complexes, Can Batlló among them.<sup>13</sup> Can Batlló was therefore zoned for public use in 1976, but it was still privately run and, in the absence of another plan, it continued to operate as usual.

### Design by city technicians

In 1987, in the flurry of Olympic projects, the city's Head of Urban Planning Joan Busquets outlined a series of grand urban proposals, one of which he called "areas of new centrality". The idea was to focus the earlier growth of the city around certain important nodes, usually at transportation hubs, where private investment and public services could be combined to "monumentalize the periphery". Close to Sants, Plaça de Cerdà was one of Busquets's "areas of new centrality", and Can Batlló was literally a block away, which meant that the site would quickly be revalorized.

<sup>12</sup> Martí Gómez, J. and Marcè i Fort, J. (1996). *Centre Social de Sants: Una experiència associativa*. Barcelona: Centre Social de Sants.

<sup>13</sup> Castro, M., et al. (2011). *Can Batlló: construir comunidad desde las ruinas de la crisis Stop: Contra la depredación de los bienes comunes*. Madrid.

Can Batlló's owner died in 1991 after fleeing the country on corruption charges. The property was left in the hands of his heirs through the real-estate company Gaudir, which hired Oriol Bohigas to design the site. Bohigas, as the head urban designer for the transition government of Barcelona, maintained a close working relationship with city architects after his departure for private practice in 1984.<sup>14</sup> His team's proposal built upon the vision for transforming Plaça de Cerdà and, at the city's request, incorporated the neighbouring site of the old Magòria station. Through a swapping of land uses, the proposal allowed the city to proceed with the privatization of a site otherwise designated only for public facilities and green space.<sup>15</sup>



Plaça de Cerdà, diagram from *La Vanguardia*, 1991

Spain had no official planning or landscape architecture professions. The urbanism department for the city, therefore, was full of architect-planners, trained in the same schools as private architects and design activists. Their opinions and motivations were hardly homogenous, but their projects and publications manifested is an overarching obsession with the formal or functional perfection of the city. As an architect, Bohigas professed an interest in the “volumetric construction of the city” and a resistance to a functional or master plan approach.<sup>16</sup> Still, the formal architectural project of Can Batlló relied on a broader city strategy to restructure, as Busquets puts it, “the city’s morphological organization”. The planning trajectory that Busquets describes in Barcelona: the Evolution of a Compact City develops from one-off schemes to mid-term interventions to overall strategies”.<sup>17</sup> Moving the “new centrality” to the periphery of the city was one of the ways Busquets sought to “establish a rigorous plan of urban form as a design strategy”.<sup>18</sup>

The totalizing view of the city required for such a view inherently saw the citizenry as the beneficiary of the city’s restructuring, but they were not its source of knowledge. Participation was not a necessary part of this process. Rather, this process relied increasingly on collaborations with private operators in order to leverage public investment. This is reflected in the organization of the city’s urbanism department, participation office and the district offices. The Urbanism department does not directly engage in participation unless a project affects more than one district of the city. Typically, Urbanism works directly with developers and their architects, while the decentralized district offices maintain contact with the residents. The connections between the two only exist internally within the administration.

<sup>14</sup> Illas Arau, E. (2007). “The Euphoric Politics of Postmodern Barcelona.” *Romance Studies* (Doctoral project). Durham, N.C.: Duke University.

<sup>15</sup> Arjalaguer, X. (1991). “Barcelona quiere derruir el ‘scalextric’ de la plaza Cerdà y rodearla de torres de oficinas.” *La Vanguardia* (pp. 29). Barcelona.

<sup>16</sup> Moix, L. (2002). *La ciudad de los arquitectos* (2 ed ed.). Barcelona: Anagrama.

<sup>17</sup> Busquets, J. (2005). *Barcelona : the urban evolution of a compact city*. Rovereto, Cambridge, MA: Nicolodi, Harvard University Graduate School of Design.

<sup>18</sup> Busquets, J.. (1989). “Architecture of the New Centrality.” *Quaderns d’Arquitectura i urbanisme* (issue 183, pp. 105-112). Barcelona.

The proposed changes to Can Batlló's zoning required city council approval, which meant negotiating with politicians, crafting land swaps and quantifying community needs. Throughout the process, city officials projected imminent construction schedules. But repeatedly, nothing happened, and local residents grew increasingly impatient. By the late 1990s the list of promised facilities was extensive: an urgent care centre, a school, a gymnasium, daycare, a library, car parks, affordable housing, a park. The residents were eager to see progress, but the industries on the site were not all eager to leave, nor was the developer eager to compensate them. And so the city's design proposals were largely put on hold.

### Design by private consultants

The real-estate bubble was at its height in 2002, when the developers began in earnest to propose a project. They named the project "Gaudir Nou Centre," which their website trumpeted as "the most exclusive project in the center of Barcelona". This time, they entrusted the design to the respected firm Batlle i Roig, whose work uses landscape as a strategy of urban organization at the regional scale. In Batlle's book, *Jardín de la Metrópoli*, urban public space is accorded poetic value in reconciling nature and urbanity. He describes this idealized metropolitan garden as "a projection of the future, not a nostalgic evocation of the past. Because of this, ecological utopias should be imaginative and progressive, not retrograde and decadent".<sup>19</sup>



Can Batlló c. 2010



Gaudir Nou Centre

Batlle led the Can Batlló project and, following the script of the book, did not pursue a nostalgic preservation of the historical factory: the main buildings were preserved—even highlighted—but the existing pattern of workshops and streets yielded to a new pattern of trees. The design process, he recalls, began with the physical pathways between the site and the community, then with a selection of a landscape typology. This was his typical design process, as he explains: "What landscape, I imagine, could go here? What landscape corresponds to this place? [...] In this decision one could say I think there should be a park, or I think there should be a river [...] or I think there should be a row of enormous trees that goes from here to there. In other words, sometimes the landscape gives you instruments such that with just one word, you are done with the project."<sup>20</sup>

The motivations for the for-profit architects differ from technicians. For economic survival, they must direct their efforts to their patrons; for social reasons, as N.J. Habraken reminds us, their work addresses their peers.<sup>21</sup> In the place of any formal or functional perfection, private consultants are often motivated by the pursuit of more

<sup>19</sup> Batlle, E. (2011). *El Jardín de la metrópoli: del paisaje romántico al espacio libre para una sociedad sostenible*. Barcelona: Gustavo Gill.

<sup>20</sup> Batlle, E. (2012). Interview. Barcelona.

<sup>21</sup> Habraken, N.J. (2005). *Palladio's children*. London ; New York: Taylor & Francis.

esoteric goals or guiding theories. Batlle's design approach poetically takes the community into account, but as a design for the community and not necessarily with the community. It is knowledge that is not based on direct contact. Neither are the city's participatory norms intended for this to happen. Through these official processes, the project proposed by Gaudir was approved in 2006 and has since been awaiting a better economic moment to be realized.

### Design by activists

In the meantime, in 2009, a group of ETSAB students preparing for their thesis projects rented a commercial studio space in the heart of Sants. None of the students was from the neighbourhood, and it was sheer chance that they ended up on the ground floor. Lali Davi is an architect with the collective that now calls itself "laCol". She recalls that the connection to the street was something of an epiphany. The relationship to the street, and to local residents, became much more intimate after the students decided to engage in an act of what Jeffrey Hou might call "guerrilla urbanism".<sup>22</sup> One night, as their street was being repaved, the group installed a miniature park, complete with trees, couches, tables and chairs. On a video of the activity, residents emerge from their homes, wondering who is responsible. And one of the women shouts "The architects!"



Plataforma members take their drawings to the street



laCol's "Mort a l'asfalt" (Death to asphalt)

Thus began a different kind of participation, of designers engaged in the daily life of a neighbourhood, on their turf, and not the other way around. Four of the students subsequently chose thesis sites in Sants, three in Can Batlló, which none knew existed prior to their arrival. Their thesis proposals were still broad strategies for site development, but they also began tactically to engage the project and the community. Their involvement coincided with growing neighbourhood anger over the still halted project. In March 2009, residents responded to a comment that the site would be open in two years. They founded a group called "Plataforma Can Batlló és pel barri," (Can Batlló belongs to the neighbourhood), and set a deadline of June 2011 for the city to live up to its promise.

With the "crisis" in full swing, neither the developer nor the city made any progress, and in late 2010 the platform threatened to enter the complex and to occupy a warehouse. The students now became instrumental actors in the social movement. They organized a conference about historic preservation; they produced maps, diagrams, and plans of the site; they started a website; they printed an enormous plan of the site and talked to people on the street. They essentially became part of the Plataforma, its only non-residents, helping to coordinate protests, and preparing for the upcoming entry, which they set for the day of June 11.

<sup>22</sup> Hou, J. (2010). *Insurgent Public Space: Guerrilla Urbanism and the Remaking of Contemporary Cities*. New York: Routledge.

The Plataforma also conducted a political and media campaign to pressure the administration, which continued to argue that entry into the property was impossible. With just over a day before the threatened occupation, the Plataforma managed to negotiate directly with Gaudir, and it became clear that the developer was more open to negotiation than city officials had indicated. This short-circuiting of the city's established avenues of communication yielded immediate progress. The next morning, the city held a press conference to announce the transfer of a large warehouse, "Bloc 11" to be managed by the Centre Social. And on June 11, hundreds of jubilant neighbors entered the site to celebrate.



Entering Can Batlló



Entering Can Batlló

### Coda

That is the story of Can Batlló. Of course, the story continues to evolve. During its first year in Bloc 11, the Plataforma has recruited an army of volunteers. The 16,000 square foot warehouse is being renovated to house a volunteer library, a day care center, an auditorium, exhibit space, and art studios. The students, now architects, are all still involved, working on design details, building furniture and doors, designing posters, and managing contractors.

Activist tactics have served the group in a fight against an administration that was impervious to its needs. But now the Plataforma is creating its own bylaws, institutionalizing its procedures, and deciding how to manage the many other social groups that want to use the space. Neighborhood anarchist groups have used the warehouse for meetings, filmmakers have been shooting a documentary, dances, festivals, dinners, and art exhibits are planned. The group asked itself at a recent meeting what they would do if an extreme political group wanted to hold a meeting there. The ensuing debate revealed a shifting of power. The tactics used to acquire this space are turning into strategies for organizing it, and these activists find themselves now in a place of authority.

Though they are using small-scale tactics, the designers still advocate for revisions to the site plan, to preserve the historical fabric, or to connect better with the neighborhood. But both the neighbors and architects realize that they have different priorities. The neighbors, having already waited 36 years, are wary of suggesting changes to the approved plans. The architects are keeping their critique visible: organizing another conference, conducting interviews, posting videos, and writing a book.

The city experienced a regime change last year, and community leaders have successfully pressured the new mayor to support the project, which he has done with an investment of 32 million euros and another promise, that construction will begin by the end of the year.



LaCol's continued engagement



Continued engagement and activism at Can Batlló's Bloc 11

## Conclusion

As for official participation, the city of Barcelona deserves a sharp critique. The visible tools of participation it utilizes are mostly one-directional—they are essentially meetings. The regulations that govern them do not provide a way for citizens to meaningfully influence the design of public space. But at the same time, the city gives direct financial and organizational support to participatory associations—neighborhood associations, social associations, and entities like Raons Públiques. This group, for example, directly challenges institutionalized practices with a goal of “improving city management through the direct inclusion of citizens in decision-making.”<sup>23</sup> This is as Borja said it should be; however, there is a large gap between supporting the idea of direct action and allowing those actions to influence urban policies. Adequate time and staff resources are rarely given to projects in order to allow any sort of participatory research, and public input is usually received too late in the process to make any difference.

Creative citizen activism is affecting urban projects nonetheless. The city, as key strategist, is appropriating the tactics of the citizens. This is an illustration of a point Javier Mozas makes: “the client who makes decisions concerning public space is also changing face. The administration, overwhelmed with working towards containing public deficit, is handing over chunks of power in two directions: to private enterprise and to citizens.”<sup>24</sup> Both of these trends are evident at Can Batlló, where the design of a large city park was left in the hands of a private developer. The city can also no longer fund important community projects, so it has generously given over management of facilities to neighborhood groups, like Bloc 11. In the midst of the economic crisis, community activists (designers included) have the resource of time. They are taking full advantage of this situation, and so far it has been empowering. But at some point this is revealed as just another face of neoliberalism, where the state disavows its responsibility for managing the structures of community well being.

The case of Can Batlló cannot promise any broad conclusions for promoting citizen participation, but it does confirm that the production of public space in Barcelona has followed a contradictory path in which official participation and unofficial community activism have both played important roles. For designers, it offers an opportunity to reflect on our motivations and to acknowledge that our strategies and tactics of engaging communities make a difference in the functional, formal, and social outcomes of urban design.

<sup>23</sup> (2011). Raons Públiques. Retrieved 11/1/2011, from <http://www.raonspublicques.org/>

<sup>24</sup> Fernandez Per, A. and Mozas, J. (2012). *Strategy and tactics in public space*. Vitoria: A+T.

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