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## The city, a battlefield. Privatisation dynamics of urban spaces in one of Barcelona's neighbourhoods

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The privatisation of urban spaces plays an increasingly prominent role among the measures designed to promote and sustain the dynamics of capital accumulation. In cities like Barcelona, bar and restaurant terraces have proliferated under the cover of measures designed to enable the productive reorientation of the city: from a Fordist and industrial past to a flexible present where tourism and restaurants have become predominant features. This productive shift has greatly affected Poblenou, a former manufacturing stronghold. Various social groups and movements in the neighbourhood have responded to and denounced such events, in addition to making proposals and suggesting alternatives, disputing the role of ownership of these processes, electing for collective appropriation protests, where the emphasis is placed on the value of use.

### Introduction

On Saturday 23 April 2016, La Rambla del Poblenou woke up to a partial lockout by bars and restaurants that would normally have had terraces in the neighbourhood's popular main street. Although the businesses remained open, their owners had decided not to set out the ever-present tables and chairs in response to the imminent application of the *Ordenança de Terrasses* [Terraces Law] in the area by the Barcelona City Council. Ten days prior to this, protest posters appeared demanding "unique and fairer planning", among other issues. The City Council argued that the area was already highly saturated and that therefore, almost one third of existing terraces needed to be removed<sup>1</sup>. The lockout was the last in a series of signs of a conflict that had been brewing for some time: the partial privatisation of the urban space in La Rambla del Poblenou, where neighbourhood residents would traditionally gather to socialise in a neighbourhood that lacks a central plaza and uses this area for local celebrations and activities, as well as neighbourhood protests and demands<sup>2</sup>.

As reported by authors, such as David Harvey (1977 and 2007), Swyngedouw, Moulaert & Rodríguez (2002) and Brenner, Peck & Theorore (2015), the crisis of the capitalist economy that took place in the 1970s was solved by moving from a rigid accumulation model, Fordism with Keynesian undertones, to a more flexible model known as neoliberalism. Cities played a crucial role in this move by allowing the continued extraction of income and capital gains, giving land and

<sup>1</sup> El País newspaper, 24/04/2016

<sup>2</sup> See, among others, Poblenou.org, 24/02/2014 <http://poblenou.org/index.php/2014/02/el-carnaval-omplira-de-festa-els-carrers-del-poblenou/> or Eldiario.es, 31/07/2016 [http://www.eldiario.es/catalunya/barcelona/Poblenou-sobreviure-primer-turistic-Barcelona\\_0\\_542795954.html](http://www.eldiario.es/catalunya/barcelona/Poblenou-sobreviure-primer-turistic-Barcelona_0_542795954.html)

urban planning a prominent role. Harvey (1982), however, in examining and updating the work of Marx & Engels (2001), pointed out that cities also allow a form of secondary exploitation; “This is secondary exploitation, which runs parallel to the primary exploitation taking place in the production process itself” (Ibid. 381). This is where issues such as rent prices, basic supply costs, basic necessities and the privatisation of urban spaces must be addressed. Precisely the latter aspect, raised as a hypothesis, is what I will examine over the next few pages: the occupation of the urban spaces comprising Poblenou’s streets and plazas for commercial purposes. This phenomenon is seen by neighbourhood social movements, which develop forms of resistance and propose alternatives to the dominant model<sup>3</sup>, as a form of dispossession, of secondary exploitation on the part of the capitalist regime in its neoliberal form - an authentic liberal Utopian project (Polanyi, 2003).

### 1. The city as a battlefield

Coming back to Brenner, Peck & Theorore (Op. cit.), as well as the aforementioned position of the city within contemporary capitalism, the neoliberal strategy involves deregulating all those aspects of social and economic life that are thought to constrain the action of market forces: the world of work, finance, borders and mobility (of capital, not people), etc. This manifests itself in the privatisation and deregularisation of national strategic industries, weakening the role of trade unions, reducing taxes on large companies, dismantling or outsourcing public services and criminalising urban poverty, among others. The idea that underpins all of this is the hypothesis that releasing capital bonds fuels the system, allowing the accumulation process to continue.

With regard to these assessments of neoliberalism, the French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1972), in his well-known works on cities and urban spaces, pointed out something that would only be confirmed four decades later: that the city has become an indispensable instrument in capital formation. Lefebvre also predicted that urbanisation would come to substitute industrialisation in capital production, turning it into one of the main factors in determining social processes. Among the consequences of liberalisation of capital movements and repositioning the role of the state, is the appearance of global competition which derives from making cities attractive on a global level (Sesson, 1999), stimulating investment and facilitating the establishment of companies by making regulations more flexible and creating infrastructure. Moreover, accompanying the inherent dynamic character of capitalism, new narratives are continually being created; narratives that, especially through urban marketing (Precedo, Orosa & Iglesias, 2010), make cities more attractive, giving them content and meaning in an attempt to turn them into commodities. This is how adjectives such as creative, smart, environmentally friendly, sensitive, participatory, etc. emerge. Although some aspects, such as new technologies, play an increasingly prominent role and urban planning continues to be a main element, sectors such as tourism are beginning to show considerable strength. These narratives also aim to make the reality of cities less political and remove conflict, giving the impression that the solution to problems can be found in technical aspects, not in politics (Gibbs et al, 2013). It is in this vein that works such as those of Claudio Milano & Jordi Gascón (2017) appear, defining this type of dynamic under the umbrella of a *duality dilemma*. Regarding this case study, the duality dilemma refers to the paradox of positioning neoliberal dynamics in the city versus the risk of generating certain deprivation and exclusion practices.

Thus, the tertiarisation of cities, their conversion into true centres of power and information control (Castells, 1995), with the consequent transfer of industrial production to the peripheries of the world system (Harvey, 1990), has been followed by their conversion into authentic “social factories” (Lithuania, 1990: 173). The urban space is not just the social sphere where life is played out, but a productive sphere that organises that life. Thus, if we take Lefebvre’s definition of *the urban space*

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<sup>3</sup> The field work was conducted, intermittently, from December 2012 to January 2017, over four years, in which a large quantity of data was gathered and numerous events participated in. The main tools used included participant observation (in assemblies, occupations, neighbourhood meetings, protests, social media, etc.), holding semi-structured interviews, as well as taking part in informal conversations and dialogues with some of the protagonists.

as a way of meeting, uniting and confronting all the elements that constitute social life (1976: 67-68), the conflict avails. Neoliberalism, as an *urban dystopia*, when it lands somewhere *creating space*, unleashes the struggle in that social life. The application of the neoliberal recipe is, however, always irregular and contradictory (Brenner, Peck & Theorore, 2015: 215). If we truly want to understand neoliberal processes we need not only to examine its theoretical or political and ideological suggestions, but also evaluate how they have come to fruition in urban areas, what their effects and contradictions have been, what institutional forms they have adopted and, finally, what forms of resistance or alternatives they have articulated.

The city is thus presented as a *battlefield*, a scene of and for conflict, and its social spaces form the basis for struggles over the production and reproduction of urban life (Harvey, 2013). In the context of *flexible* societies, the disappearance of factories does not mean the disappearance of production relationships, but rather their elevation to the spatial plane (Herin, 1982, López, op. cit. and Gaudemar, 1991). We could therefore talk about the formation of a class front (Garnier, 2017) in which, on the one hand, social movements and groups affected by the city's transition from the scene of *social life* to commodities, would appear and, on the other hand, the financiers, businessmen, builders, advertisers, etc. would be grouped together, i.e. the bourgeoisie, elected politicians [councillors], their ministers, their planners, their specialists in 'urban problems'; a local elite that belongs to the upper and middle classes of the salary earning middle class, the small intellectual bourgeoisie (Ibid.: 90)".

Finally, and as authors like Gabriel Hetland & Jeff Goodwin (2013) remind us, the capitalist system not only manifests in cities in a direct manner, but also indirectly, shaping collective identities and solidarity, distributing power and resources among different classes and fractions of classes, facilitating class divisions and the emergence of new ideologies and cultural forms.

## 2. The role of urban spaces in Barcelona's capital dynamics

In this article we will look at urban spaces from the perspective described by Delgado, of town planners, architects and designers, [i.e. the] empty space between buildings that has to be filled in line with the aims of developers and authorities (Delgado, 2011), something which has, in certain fields, come to be known as *public space*.

As highlighted by the authors Di Masso, Berroata & Vidal (2017), beyond ideological considerations (Ibid.) of the topic, however, which appear when the idealised characteristics of the space [...], on being invoked in the context of certain socio-spatial practices, serve to justify and legitimise, or to undermine and delegitimise, particular configurations of power, privilege and domination relations [...] (Ibid.: 71).

What is certain is that, in relation to the contemporary process of capital accumulation, this *common space* in cities has ended up becoming a means of production, another element in the chain that enables capital expansion and multiplication. The difference between this and other elements that also form part of this accumulation process is, among other issues, that it occurs under the logic of dispossession (Harvey, 2007), disaffecting assets that are still under public or collective control and, on the other hand, allowing unwanted appropriation practices (Delgado, 2008) on the part of some social players (as we have already mentioned) who dispute the continuity of the accumulation dynamic itself.

The processes of privatising urban spaces, sometimes justified by the need to create *quality public spaces* (Delgado, 2013), are shown to be necessary when it comes to implementing urban policies that promote the improvement of neighbourhoods<sup>4</sup>. These interventions, however, often result in

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<sup>4</sup> In this regard, it is worth highlighting Law 2/2004, of 4 June, on the improvement of neighbourhoods, urban areas and villages that require special attention. Some of the interventions that have been conducted under the umbrella of this Law have made a clear commitment to the creation of so-called public spaces. See El País, 20/06/2014 [https://elpais.com/caa/2014/06/20/catalunya/1403289026\\_784261.html](https://elpais.com/caa/2014/06/20/catalunya/1403289026_784261.html)

gentrification (Hernández & Tutor, 2015), or they end up being merely decoration for large real estate operations (Ibid.). The objective underlying this rhetoric is none other than trying to attract population groups with greater purchasing power and certain consumption patterns; the middle classes are the real recipients and final beneficiaries of the above-mentioned policies, since they are thought to be the only ones that can make investments profitable. Thus exclusive, and therefore excluding, areas emerge, attracting people of a certain status that is befitting to the space designed. We are therefore talking more about land than urban spaces, and a process of commercialisation and privatisation that is nothing more than a veritable assault.

### 3. El Poblenou neighbourhood: origin and context

El Poblenou neighbourhood, in the District of Sant Martí, has experienced a radical change in its appearance over the last one hundred and fifty years. In the middle of the nineteenth century, the area did not even figure on maps (Figure 1). At that time, El Poblenou was a brackish area<sup>5</sup> used by the rudimentary industry of printed calico textiles for some of its productive activity. However, it would soon be overtaken by the accelerated process of industrialisation that took place in Barcelona during the second half of the 19th century.

The so-called *Catalan Manchester* thus emerges, one of the largest industrial concentrations in the whole state, driven both by the availability of land and by its proximity to the port and its connection with the railroad, which passed along the nearby coast. It was then that the first speculative processes based in the area occurred. Some of the industries that moved their head offices to Poblenou came from other industrial areas in the city, like El Raval, and took advantage of their relocation (through a change of use) to obtain the resulting capital gains. In addition, some of the new factories - such as Can Girona, later MACOSA - even appropriated the urban framework, occupying and privatising streets and roads that, in Cerdà's city planning, appeared as public roads (Fabre & Huertas Claveria, 1976).

Industrial expansion, which saw a period of consolidation and stagnation between 1905 and 1939, continued until the mid-1960s. Then, a clear period of decadence began caused, among other things, by the appearance of the Zona Franca free-trade zone, promoted by Franco, and the aforementioned limits of the Fordist model and the geographic expansion of the capital (Marrero, 2003 and Tatjer & Vilanova, 2002). From that moment on, the well-established neighbourhood, with historical and sentimental boundaries situating it between Av. Meridiana, Gran Via, La Rambla del Prim and the sea, would see its old and increasingly decadent industrial zone share space with new and emerging productive sectors such as logistics and transport.

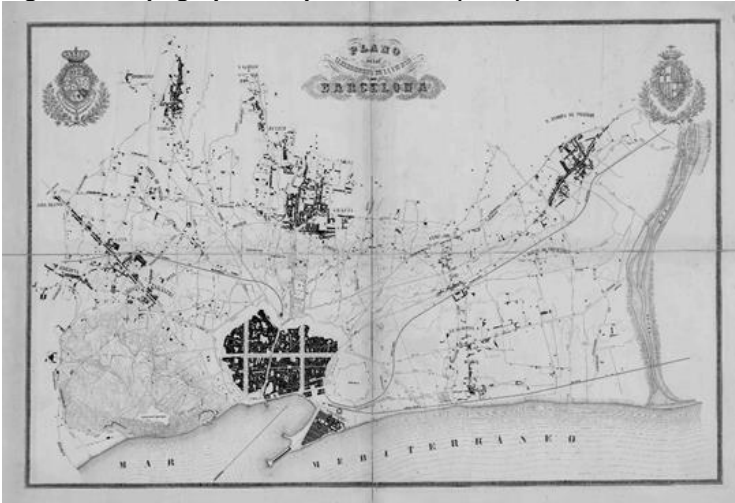
In 1966 the Ribera Plan was created. This was an attempt, by a group of businessmen with interests and real estate in the area, to transform part of its urban, industrial and services network (those located between la Barceloneta, el Besòs and C/ Enna, currently Ramón Turró), into a luxury residential complex by the sea. This plan, which included wiping the slate clean inside the aforementioned boundaries, including Poblenou cemetery, was driven by the Ribera, S.A. company, and had the support of the Francoist City Council of Josep Maria de Porcioles. However, the overwhelming neighbourhood response, which included a counter-plan drafted by Manuel de Solà-Molares, together with the political instability at the end of the Franco dictatorship and the incipient economic crisis of 1973, finally put an end to it (Tatjer, 1973 & Mansilla, 2015).

Despite the failure of the Ribera Plan, however, the area closest to Ciutadella Park was eventually radically transformed when it was chosen as the ideal place to accommodate the Olympic Village of the 92nd Games in the late 1980s.

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<sup>5</sup> There are still references to this in the streets of today, such as C/ Juncar or C/ Llacuna.

Figure 1.- Topographic map. Barcelona (1855).



Source: [www.anycerda.org](http://www.anycerda.org)

The works deployed to construct the new neighbourhood involved an investment of approximately €168 million divided between coastal defence works, the seafront promenade, the purchase of land, creating Av. Litoral, restructuring the railway, building collectors, urbanisation, landscaping and, finally, the facilities. All this without taking into account the apartments intended for sportsmen and women, which would later be sold, freely, as dwellings on the city's property market. The *Proyecto de Reordenación Urbana del Sector del Poblenou* [Poblenou Urban Planning Project] was designed by the City Council architect at that time, and their Urban Planning Director, Oriol Bohigas, and involved the development of 125 hectares, 15 of which were reclaimed from the sea, as well as the construction of two thousand houses. The final result is a neighbourhood of *wealthy classes* where most of the free space between buildings is privatised (Montaner, 2010); the Olympic Village neighbourhood of Poblenou, which had a Territorial GROSS Disposable Household Income for 2015 (DHI) of 150.2, compared to a city average of 100, making it three times higher than other neighbourhoods in the District, such as Besòs i el Maresme, which has a DHI of 54.4.

This huge neighbourhood transformation with land playing a leading role would not, however, be the last. In the same year as the Olympic Games were held, a new urban reform began in the area: initially known as Olympic Village 2, which comprises the Front Marítim area today. This time, 20.4 hectares were developed on land reclaimed from old MACOSA and Catalana de Gas industrial installations, the two companies that made up Ribera S.A, almost 30 years earlier. Seven blocks were built in the spirit Cerdà's grid pattern, with inner courtyards open to the public combined with small private gardens, resulting in 1,723 flats. This, along with the fact that the new neighbourhood Diagonal Mar i el Front Marítim del Poblenou has one of the highest DHIs in Barcelona (162.5), is what has led people like Zaida Muxí (2011) to state that, in the end, we have witnessed the birth of the Ribera Plan, but under a "revised" model.

It did not take long for new interventions to be implemented. The Diagonal Mar neighbourhood was completed on the eve of the *Fòrum de les Cultures* cultural festival in 2004. The project, developed entirely using private capital, occupied 34 hectares of land, 13 of which were semi-public. The design centred around the construction of a commercial centre, the *Diagonal Mar* leisure and shopping complex measuring more than 87,000 m<sup>2</sup>, which was accompanied in the second phase by offices, hotels and housing. These buildings were contained in five super-blocks, each of which contained 400 units, as well as a 15 hectare park designed by Enric Miralles. Today, it is still possible to see the HINES branding on some of the signs around the Park (Figure 2). HINES is the company that developed the whole area, giving a new face to the famous "Barcelona Model", and abandoning one of its foundational principles: municipal leadership (García-Ramón & Albet, 2000).

District 22@ was developed around the same time. At that time, Plan 22@ constituted the city's most important transformation, as it affected almost 116 hectares of industrial land, the equivalent of almost 120 blocks in the Eixample neighbourhood. The name 22@, given to a District of the territory, came from the reclassification of old land, which was classified as industrial in the original PGM (General Metropolitan Plan) in 1976, receiving the cadastral label 22a. The Plan was framed within the Amendment of the General Metropolitan Plan document in 2000 (Barcelona City Council, 2000), which was intended to be flexible since it recognised the complexity of the transformations, as well as the operations that Barcelona City Council intended to promote, along with those developed by private initiatives who demanded its flexibility. As stated in its introduction, the purpose of the Plan was to face the challenge of the new economy by presenting Poblenou as the main economic and technological platform of Barcelona, Catalonia and Spain, from a 21st Century perspective (Ibid.). As the anthropologist Isaac Marrero (Marrero, op. cit.) pointed out, 22@ sought nothing more than to promote the move from an industrial Fordist to a flexible post-Fordist production model, facilitating the establishment of new companies through the creation of infrastructure and amenities, as well as public support in aspects related to research and technology transfer.

**Figure 2.- Signposting at Diagonal Mar Park, bearing the name of the company that urbanised the area, HINES.**



Source: Drafted by document author.

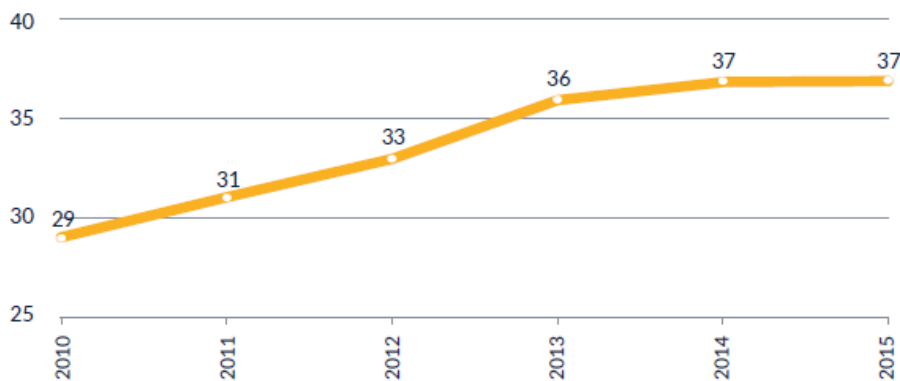
The results, however, have not been as satisfactory as the City Council might have hoped. In a recent report (City Council, 2016) prepared by the INNOVA Team, alongside the CRIT Consolidated Research Group 'Creativity, Innovation and Urban Transformation' at the University of Barcelona, for Barcelona City Council, it was shown that, by 2016, 50.60% of the land initially planned was still pending completion of its transformation: the targets set were far from having been achieved. Thus, of the 4,000 public housing units planned, only 1,600 had been built for the year in question; only 28.09% of the green areas had been developed and only 9.66% of the total original surface area for facilities had been built upon. In addition, similarly to what happened when the industries of the nineteenth century moved to the neighbourhood, 52.7% of the companies established in the District came from other areas of the city, with the consequent risk of unleashing speculative processes, while only 30% of the total economic activity generated belonged to new technologies and/or knowledge sectors. As a Letter to the Editor of the *El País* newspaper as early as 2005 already warned: it is clear that this neighbourhood, which was supposed to house technology companies, is a failure and the only thing the Mayor has thought to do, in addition to getting rid of the workshops and the little industries still in this area, is to encourage the odd company to move their head offices from one part of Barcelona to another, at the cost of speculation and increasing house prices (Saguer, 2005).

**Table 1.- Hotels, category and exact location in District 22@. Barcelona (2016).**

Hotel Hilton Diagonal Mar Barcelona	Pg. Taulat, 262-264	Hotel 5*
Hotel Amrey Diagonal	Av. Diagonal, 161	Hotel 3*
Hotel GBB 4 Barcelona	Doctor Trueta, 164	Hotel 4*
Hotel Barcelona Princess	Av. Diagonal, 1	Hotel 4*
Hotel Confortel Barcelona	Ramon Turró, 196-198	Hotel 4*
Hotel Barceló Atenea Mar	Pg. Garcia i Fària, 37-47	Hotel 4*
Hotel Sallés Pere IV	Pallars, 128-130	Hotel 4*
Hotel Apsis Porta Marina	Sancho de Àvila, 32-34	Hotel 4*
Hotel Me Barcelona	Pg. Taulat, 272-286	Hotel 5*
Hotel & Spa Villa Olímpic@ Suites	Pallars, 121	Hotel 4*
Hotel Rafaelhoteles Diagonal Port	Lope de Vega, 4	Hotel 4*
Hotel AC Barcelona	Pg. Taulat, 278	Hotel 4*
Hotel Husa Barcelona Mar	Provençals, 10	Hotel 4*
Holiday Inn Express Barcelona City 22@	Pallars, 203	Hotel 3*
Hotel Ibis Barcelona Pza. Glories	Ciutat de Granada, 99	Hotel 2*

Source: Barcelona City Council

**Graph 1.- Hotels, aparthotels and apartments in the Sant Martí District (2010-2015).**



Source: Drafted by document author based on Barcelona City Council data.

Finally, it should be noted that something that did flourish in the 22@ area, as well as in the rest of the District, as a consequence of the urban policies implemented, were hotels. Thus the area, which at the beginning of the project did not have a “critical mass” (Ibid.) of hotel rooms suitable for the type of tourism they had hoped for, now has 15 hotels (Table 1) in different categories<sup>6</sup>. If we

<sup>6</sup> The neighbourhood platform #EnsPlantem, veïns en perill d’extinció [residents in danger of extinction], highlights that there are a total of 32 hotels in the District as a whole, amounting to more than 12,000 beds, and more than 700

take into account the whole of the Sant Martí District (Graph 1), the number of hotels increased to 37 in 2015, with a total of 11,509 rooms, 18.91% more than only six years earlier.

#### 4. Urban spaces and social movements in the neighbourhood of Poble Nou

Although the trigger for the lockout on the Rambla del Poble Nou had been the planning of terraces in this area in the context of the Law approved in this respect, the conflicts surrounding the privatisation of this unique urban space in the neighbourhood began some time before.

During the Autumn of 2012, the Sant Martí District, at the time governed by *Convergència i Unió* (CiU - Convergence and Union), paved La Rambla without consulting local residents, business owners or other Poble Nou organisations. According to neighbourhood residents<sup>7</sup>, this became, on the one hand, the trigger for a series of subsequent protests crying out against a certain way of governing based on unilateral decision-making by the District and, on the other hand, it awakened the neighbourhood to the need to take the initiative regarding the meaning and future of the Rambla itself. Some months later, in March 2013, and following a period of consultations and meetings between different local players, the *Associació de Veïns i Veïnes* (AAVV - neighbourhood association) del Poble Nou, held a meeting under the name *Espai Actiu Veïnal* [Active Neighbourhood Space]. During that meeting, the creation of a common front with regard to non-consensual decisions made by the City Council was approved. A few days later, on 9 April, news arrived that the paving process, which had been stopped at the roundabouts along La Rambla, would continue. That same day, a last-minute meeting held at one of the roundabouts, where La Rambla meets C/ Lluç, during which locals decided to ask the District to bring a complete halt to the works and begin a participatory process that would allow local residents to contribute to decisions about the type of Rambla that would be created. Despite the request made, the following day, on 10 April, contractors began the works that would eventually be halted by a neighbourhood protest (Figure 3). *Fem Rambla* [Let's Make La Rambla] thus began, a process that aimed to: co-define the remodelling of La Rambla; establish the uses that would co-exist on La Rambla and ways to make them compatible with one another; empower local residents in decision-making; and define a participatory method that would act as a regular link between the District and the neighbourhood.

Figure 3.- Poble Nou local residents halt the works on La Rambla. Barcelona April 2013.



Source: Drafted by document author.

The final results of *Fem Rambla*, detailed in a proposal document of December 2013, highlighted, in relation to terraces, the need to reduce the space taken up by them; the way they are planned, in order to allow people to walk between them; clear marking out of the space allotted for each

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tourist apartments. This platform made it so that in the approval of the Special Urban Tourist Accommodation Plan (PEUAT), the district of Poble Nou was considered as an area of natural decline.

<sup>7</sup> *Fem Rambla*, 2013. The *Fem Rambla* initiative continued into the middle of 2014. The urban development of the last stretch of the road between C/ Taulat and Passeig de Calvell is the result of decisions made by this initiative.



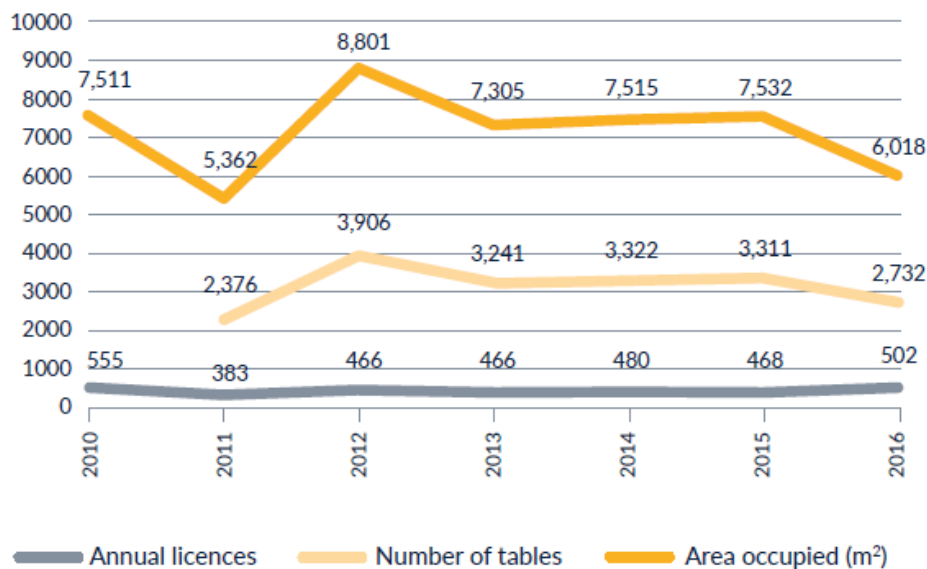
terrace; guaranteed regulatory compliance; visibility of permits and, finally, an effective limit on the opening of new bars and/or restaurants.

In this sense, Manel, a local Poblenou resident and active participant in *Fem Rambla*, sees a clear relationship between tourist development, the failure of 22@ and the role of La Rambla in the neighbourhood's new production framework within the city, stating that "the growth of tourism in Poblenou brings a very big problem with it. We will collapse, like La Rambla in Barcelona. Once 22@ failed, local government changed their focus to tourism. This is precisely what *Fem Rambla* wants to see monitored. We all like to enjoy a beer on La Rambla, but we cannot privatise or obstruct the use of public spaces by city residents".

The proliferation of terraces is directly related to the neighbourhood's productive shift. Taking 2010 as a starting point, the tourism and hotel sector has gone from representing 5.6% of Poblenou's economic activity to 9.9% seven years later. Sectors such as industry, on the other hand, have decreased their participation in the local economy, going from 50.3% to 37.7% for the same period. This increase in the hotel sector has, inevitably, physically manifested itself in the neighbourhood's streets and plazas in the form of gradually occupying them with the tables and changes synonymous with terraces.

Barcelona City Council does not collect statistics on the number of licences granted for terraces, the number of tables that make up a terrace or the area occupied by them in each neighbourhood, although they do for the District. Figures at a territorial administrative level would, however, allow some conclusions to be drawn with regard to advances made in terms of privatisation of urban spaces as a consequence of a greater number of terraces.

**Graph 2. Annual licences, number of tables and area occupied by terraces in the Sant Martí District (2010-2016)**



Source: Drafted by document author based on Barcelona City Council data.

As shown by Graph 2, the number of annual licences for terraces has gone down from 555 in 2010 to 502 in 2016, 53 fewer licences. This apparent reduction, however, is deceptive, as in 2010 and 2011 the City Council's statistics system only showed total licences, without distinguishing between annual and weekly licences, whilst the data was separated for 2012. If both types of licence were added together, by 2012 there would be as many as 630 while, from that moment onwards, there would be a gradual decrease, down to 544 in 2016. A curious fact, however, is that six-month

licences practically disappeared in that year, dropping to 42. This suggests a disruption in the classic seasonality of tourism and hospitality; not only in the Sant Martí District, but throughout the city.

If we were to highlight a turning point in the proliferation of this type of licence, however, and the subsequent occupation of urban spaces, this would be represented by 2012, just one year after CiU entered local government, headed by Mayor Xavier Trias. The leap is clearly exponential, with an increase of more than 64% in the urban surface area that has been privatised. This seems to confirm the assertion made by geographers Adrián H. Cordero and Aritz Tutor when they affirm that the change of political party in the city government was characterised by undertaking neoliberal management in Barcelona (Hernández & Tutor, 2015).

In this way, among others, this neoliberal management brought about an increase in the demand for the use of urban spaces from a commercial point of view, an issue taken advantage of by CiU when drawing up a new Terraces Law in 2013. The document finally approved and published in the Official Bulletin of the Province (BOP) of Barcelona is clear in this regard; the reasons for establishing these regulations were: to broaden and improve the services offered by establishments in the current crisis situation; to make the most of the city's good climate by allowing bar and restaurant customers to sit outside; and to satisfy the demand from the growing number of tourists visiting Barcelona<sup>8</sup>. Again, the relationship between urban spaces, terraces and tourism. The proposal was immediately responded to by different organisations, including the Federation of Neighbourhood Associations of Barcelona (FAVB) and the Neighbourhood Association (AAVV) of Casc Antic. The arguments put forward by these associations pointed to the fact that terraces were being allowed “en masse and with many exceptions” and, in addition, “selling and privatising the whole city”, which is counter intuitive to a pleasant neighbourhood co-existence and to facilitating other uses of the street (BTV, 2013).

The Law did not, however, satisfy bar and terrace owners either. They found it inflexible and demanded regulations that would guarantee the development of economic activity. This fact was also accentuated when it came to planning spaces that were considered “unique” (Bes, 2016), such as La Rambla del Poblenou, something that ultimately led to the lockout of April 2016 (Figure 4).

**Figure 4.- Lockout of bars and restaurants along La Rambla del Poblenou, April 2013**



Source: Drafted by document author

Although after the Law was brought into force, the number of licences granted and in the area occupied by terraces both fell, at least across the Sant Martí District as a whole, and conflicts

<sup>8</sup> Preamble to the *Ordenança de Terrasses* [Terraces Law]. Barcelona City Council (2013) <https://bop.diba.cat/scripts/ftpisa.aspx?fnew?bop2013&I2/022013032523.pdf>

surrounding the privatisation of urban spaces did not end, but rather they took new directions. So it was that in May 2016 the neighbourhood platform *#EnsPlantem, veïns en perill d'extinció* (#Let's Plant, city residents in danger of extinction) was born. The main objective of *#EnsPlantem* was to reject the touristification process of the neighbourhood and its effects: increased housing and rental prices; the change in the physiognomy of the environment i.e. the appearance of tourist establishments and businesses that have little or nothing to do with the daily necessities of local residents; and, finally, the overpopulation of bars and terraces in Poblenou's traditional social spaces, the Rambla itself standing out among these.

Rosa, a member of *#EnsPlantem*, defines the platform as a movement "in favour of public spaces and housing", arising as a consequence of the confluence of social movements that were already working in the neighbourhood and that were occasionally found in different areas in Poblenou. Among the first protests proposed by the group were the symbolic occupations, one month later, of a plot of land in the neighbourhood next to which two hotels were planned to be built. The plot, popularly known as "La Vanguardia" as it formerly housed La Vanguardia newspaper's printing press, was owned by the public and was pending designation as a green area following approval of the General Metropolitan Plan (PGM) in 1976. The occupiers, through their protest, rejected the arrival of tourism in Poblenou, with properties having become more expensive, shops opening that did not meet the needs of local residents but of tourists, and 'the increasingly large presence of foreign visitors in bars and terraces' (La Vanguardia, 2016). For Roser, who is also an *#EnsPlantem* activist, as well as other neighbourhood groups, the privatisation of urban spaces in Poblenou "is a form of exclusion [...] people have been excluded in terms of consumption, from social spaces, [...] including other more commercialised spaces, such as bars or restaurants, because there are people who can now no longer afford to use them [...]".

The collective response was to symbolically "plant themselves"<sup>9</sup>, but also to demonstrate that it was possible to create spaces far removed from the commercialisation that was typical of the neoliberal city. Thus, from then on, the *Huerto de La Vanguardia* [La Vanguardia Allotment Garden], or *Huerta Indignada 6* [Indignant Allotment Garden 6]<sup>10</sup>, was created, its name owing to it being the sixth plot of land occupied for that purpose in the neighbourhood. The reason behind the movement (a powerful gathering) to occupy the green spaces in Poblenou, as Paco, who took part in the protest, told us, was "to reclaim urban spaces and appropriate them. The slogan is 'abandoned plot = occupied plot'. Poblenou's urban development plan, the 22@, arose in times of boom, of fat cows, and of course... it was for high standing offices and hotels... this plan does not take into consideration the people of the neighbourhood [...]. We have a right to occupy a space with no life and change this by giving it life".

This was not the last plot of land to be occupied by *#EnsPlantem*. In January 2017, another protest was carried out in the same area of La Vanguardia, this time on the opposite side of the block. The fate of this piece of land was to become a new allotment (Figure 5). The following entry in the field notebook of ethnographic research about the neighbourhood was made by a protest witness "It is starting to rain and some people are leaving. Morale is good. It is 1.03 pm - and the allotment is practically finished. The black earth looks like it has green measles. I notice there are a few foreign people here, English and French speakers, I can tell by their accents. Young middle class people, of course, are attracted by the atmosphere of Poblenou's "protest district". "Next we will plant 2000 tomato plants here – says Sergio", an Argentinian who also took part in the occupation and creation of allotment garden 6".

<sup>9</sup> Ens Plantem translated into English means Let's Plant.

<sup>10</sup> Facebook page of the Huerto de La Vanguardia or Huerto 6 <https://www.facebook.com/Poble9Huerta6/>

**Figure 5.- Creating the La Vanguardia allotment, January 2017.**



Source: Drafted by document author

Another of the alternatives suggested by the platform was that of temporary, unwanted appropriations (Delgado, 2011), of the neighbourhood's highly disputed areas, such as La Rambla. Thus, in mid-June *#EnsPlantem* called a meeting/dinner at the point where La Rambla meets C/ Ramón Turró. The objective, as mentioned in a press release drafted by the group was “on the one hand, re-appropriation by local residents of an emblematic neighbourhood space that, these days, has been seized by bars and restaurants with their terraces and, on the other hand, as well as gathering support for protests, to inform people of the steps taken in relation to PEUAT's allegations and design the next steps for the neighbourhood<sup>11</sup>”.

Both *#EnsPlantem* and other neighbourhood groups took part, at the end of January, in the so-called *People's occupation of La Rambla*. The protest, coordinated by up to 30 associations and organisations in the city, attempted, among other things, to respond to “the commercialisation of public spaces”<sup>12</sup>. Another extract from the field notebook serves as a record of the protest.

As the initial idea was to conduct a *people's occupation* of La Rambla, some people had brought chairs, tables, food, coffee, etc., with the intention of eating breakfast in the street. In fact, *#EnsPlantem* first came up with the idea of bringing breakfast from home and eating it in La Rambla (Figure 6).

**Figure 6. Participants in the people's occupation of La Rambla eating breakfast. Barcelona January 2017**



Source: Drafted by document author

<sup>11</sup> <https://laflordemaig.cat/2016/06/nota-de-premsa-veins-del-poblenou-celebraran-aquest-divendres-una-assemblea-oberta-i-un-sopar-al-mig-de-la-rambla-del-poblenou-16062016/>

<sup>12</sup> El Periódico newspaper, 2017.

## 5. Brief final considerations

The *productive shift* that has taken place in the Barcelona neighbourhood of Poblenou, in line with what has happened in the rest of the city, as well as in the capitalist global North, could be framed within the neoliberal policies implemented by different political, administrative and economic institutions since the 1970s with the aim of promoting and sustaining the general accumulation process. In the context of Poblenou, the move from spatial specialisation focused on classic industrial production to one focused, firstly, on logistics and transport, secondly on urban planning and new communication technologies, and on tourism and the hotel industry, which have reached remarkable prominence, would fit within what David Harvey calls the spatial and temporal solution to the capitalist crisis, i.e. the rapid decline in manufacturing employment since 1972 has highlighted rapid growth in employment in services, not so much in retail trade, transport distribution and personal services, as in services to producers, finance, insurance and real estate (Harvey, 1982 and 1990: 180-181). In this sense, tourism and the hotel industry play a fundamental role: the acceleration of consumption rotation time, which is intimately linked to the production of events and/or services rather than tangible goods. In order for this shift to take place, however, clear and forceful intervention from the State is required, in this case, the City Council through the accelerated privatisation of urban spaces.

In certain circumstances, the implementation of this dystopian experience clashes with the democracy demanded of urban policies by urban social movements (Castells, 1986). In Poblenou, this manifests itself in local residents demanding to be taken into account when it comes to designing the future La Rambla, and in the creation of groups such as *Fem Rambla*. The dynamic set in motion even led to the requirement for a limitation on the proliferation of terraces, since the phenomenon was observed as a form of privatisation of this emblematic part of Poblenou.

A clear answer to the dynamics unfolding in Barcelona is the mere existence of democratic consultation and spaces for participation in drafting urban policies. Neighbourhood social movements, however, have managed to go even further. Occupation, both symbolic and effective, of plots of land in the process of being transformed, and their subsequent democratic management, are acts that generate substantial strain. They are statements that demonstrate that other forms of managing spaces are possible: those emphasising the value of use versus the value of change. They are also accompanied by acts of unwanted appropriation; acts that place the emphasis not on the ownership of space, but on the space as something belonging to, right for or suitable for urban life without needing authorisation from those who claim to be its owners. This is the case when it comes to organising dinners, assemblies, leisure and festive events, in highly symbolic public spaces, not just in Poblenou, but also in the city of Barcelona.

In short, faced with the commercialisation of spaces promoted by different political institutions, alternatives aimed at “bringing life” to spaces, as well as recovering forms of popular appropriation of streets and squares. As measures to combat dispossession, they have yet to prove their potential as regular and stable forms of creating space within the framework of a political, social and economic system that is moving in the opposite direction.

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