

Strategies of Remembrance: Branding the New Barcelona

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Abstract

The profound transformations taking place in Barcelona's urban landscape in the last 35 years have given place to what is now internationally known as the Barcelona model. In the process, extensive areas with its built environments have polemically disappeared to make room for the new, glossy Barcelona. Framing these changes is the transition from an industrial to a postindustrial city. As Barcelona has reinvented itself, tourism has become one of its most prosperous and defining industries. This paper looks at the treatment of the built industrial heritage and the struggles between social actors to define what is the place of this past in the definition of a city whose identity is now defined by its (increasingly multicultural) dwellers as much as it is designed for the pleasure of tourists. The paper looks at one key case where issues of memory, class, sustainability and democracy intersect in complex ways with the branding of Barcelona for competition in the international market.

The "Barcelona model"¹ defines what we could call a strategy of urban regeneration defining the profound changes, socio-economic as well as urbanistic in nature, the city has experienced from the mid 1970s.² These have granted the city, and the local politicians that brought it to being, a wide international and domestic acclaim amongst urban planners, architects, geographers, sociologists and politicians. Highly praised by these for the impact it has had on the citizens and the economy of the city is the formal quality in the design and architecture of urban environments.³ In short, as the dominant opinion goes, an urban space articulated in the logic of an exhausted industrial structure has proven able to reinvent itself with more beauty, more economic success and more social justice.

But Barcelona's most recent urban transformation is not short of critics either. In the last ten years, a growing group of local grass-roots activists,⁴ historians, architects⁵ and local museums⁶ have publicly denounced the turning of the city into a catwalk where the whole city poses for the enjoyment of

¹ There is an extensive bibliography defining and reflecting upon the Barcelona model. See my "Barcelona: del modelo a la marca" y "Urbanism, culture and the post-industrial city: Challenging the 'Barcelona Model,'" were I consider more in depth the critical implications of the concept, and provide relevant bibliography.

² Changes the fundamental nature of which can be subsumed under global processes of urban transformation in first world cities well studied by Harvey (1989 and 1996). See Balibrea 2004 for a more extensive discussion of the literature considering the theoretical underpinnings of these urban phenomena.

³ Barcelona has been called "the city of architects" due to the power these were perceived of having in the nature and shape of transformations undergone by the city. The construction of new environments and buildings in the city accelerates exponentially with the award to Barcelona of the 1992 Olympic Games in 1986. See Balibrea 2004 for a more detailed discussion of the role of architecture in the new Barcelona.

⁴ Such as the Fòrum Ribera del Besòs or the FAVB [Federation of Neighborhood Associations of Barcelona].

⁵ Such as Jordi Borja, Joan Roca, Josep Lluís Montaner, Manuel Delgado, Julià Guillamón, Xavier Antich or Eduard Bru.

⁶ Such as MACBA [Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona], Fundació Tàpies and CCCB [Center of Contemporary Culture of Barcelona].

tourists. They point to the commoditisation of what was most progressive in the original model; argue that changes to a service economy and society placing tourism at its center have made the city a theme park.⁷ Barcelona, they claim, has been embellished for the new citizen/consumer/tourist at the expense of making it aseptic, of expelling its contradictions and unpalatable views.⁸ They criticize the culture of consensus, the elimination of dissident voices⁹ and, with it, the wiping out in space of a history and a present of conflict. They accuse institutions of having built a model city for those who can afford it. Some of the formerly unsavoury places in neighbourhoods such as Poblenou, Raval, or Besós, succumbed before the assault of bulldozers demolishing the unwanted and building anew at unaffordable prices for the majority of their residents (fig. 1 and 2). Fabulous levels of speculation produced by processes of requalification of industrial land since the mid 1970s, along with the international appreciation that Barcelona enjoys as a model city, have turned gentrification into one of the most poignant socio-political problems marring the idyllic dominant image of the city.¹⁰



Figure 1: open fields, old and new construction in Poblenou

⁷ Sorkin characterizes the transformation of American cities into theme parks as sacrificing the city as the site of community and human connection (1992:xiii) and as privileging “the physical preservation of the remnants of the historical city to the human ecologies that produced and inhabit them” (1992:xiv). A similar critique of the uses of history and heritage can be found in Huxtable.

⁸ And in so doing turning social space into invented space (Huxtable 1997:12-37). See also Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) and Sassen and Roost (1999) for critical analyses of the impact of tourism in cities.

⁹ The origins of the urban transformations making up what was later known as Barcelona model are to be found in the very progressive alliance of social movements, grass-roots activism and leftist politics taking place at the beginning of Spanish transition to democracy in the late 1970s. Critics (see Antich) of later developments in the Barcelona model, particularly after the Olympic nomination, will consistently point to the increasing alienation of the political class, now closely allied to the private, business sector, from a grass-roots and social activism that felt increasingly powerless and silenced in decision-making processes. See Marshall for a historical introduction tracing the evolution of relations (and lack thereof) between major actors in the process of city transformation. For a sympathetic account of the evolution of these relations, see Calavita and Ferrer.

¹⁰ See Balibrea 2005 for a revision of critical voices of the Barcelona model. Due to space constraints, I offer just a couple of examples of the political nature of such critiques. The first one, by the collective Espai en Blanc [blank space], represents the most politically radical positions: “What is essential in the Barcelona brand-name is that it constitutes a new way of political domination. We call this way of exercising power and, consequently, the way of obedience that corresponds to it, postmodern fascism” (Espai en Blanc et. al. 2004: 20-21) [MPB: My translation]. The second comes from a more philosophically and culturally based analysis that emphasizes the destruction of memory: “... there are transformations which erase memory in order to install oblivion and convert places into caricatures of themselves. Transformations of spaces and cities through which people give up any role they had as protagonists to yield this role to pure space. Transformations which in the end turn citizens into tourists in their own cities. Without realising it, we already contemplate Barcelona from a hotel balcony.” (Antich 2005:84-85).



Figure 2: Demolition of an old factory, Poblenou

Be that as it may, one thing is certain. The new Barcelona rises over the destruction of vast spaces of social production and reproduction from its industrial era, i.e., factories and working class housing, while its postindustrial personality and character are defined to an important extent by a wealth of proudly restored old buildings, most of them belonging to the *modernista* architectural movement.¹¹ It would appear, then, that the uses of the city's material past play a key explanatory role in the interpretation of Barcelona's urban transformation. The built environment is a historical creature, even if its being inherited from a complex past is not materialized constantly in everyday uses. The popular neighbourhood as much as the architectural jewel or the monument to a national glory are all subject to memory in the palimpsest that the city is. That being said, the conditions for survival of all and every one of these built environments depends on their being considered productive in the present.

Some old buildings are lucky to become the apple of a city's eye. Such is the case of the *modernista* heritage in Barcelona, led by Gaudí (fig. 3). Why? The care with which democratic governments as well as private capital ventures have favoured its restoration runs parallel to its having become the core of Barcelona's comparative advantage as a city internationally renowned by its architecture. The modern nature of Catalan *modernista* architecture is nowadays very intelligently woven at the discursive level as well as in the built environment with contemporary interventions defining the Barcelona model (fig. 4).¹² Conjointly, they partake in the quality brand associated with Barcelona by

¹¹ Catalan *modernisme* "refers to a two- old process occurring in [Catalonia] during the two crucial decades spanning the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Within a continuing surge of social transformation there emerged together impulses for the explicit *modernization* of a culture considered archaic, pedestrian and provincial [...] and for the creation of a specifically *national art*." Trenc Ballester and Yates (1988:17). Within the field of architecture: "The term *Modernisme*[...] refers to a specifically Catalan phenomenon, considered as that stage of the universal Modern Movement which combined the eclectic choice of historical references with the introduction of modern materials, and infused decoration, even construction, with the flowing lines borrowed from the primary source of Nature. It was much more than a local variant of *Art Nouveau* because it became a style identified with a total movement to affirm Catalan nationhood and cultural autonomy, differentiated from Spanishness and attuned to its advanced European counterparts." Mackay (1985:vii).

¹² The Caixa Forum museum is a perfect example of this discursive and architectural weaving of continuities between the great architecture of yesteryear and the best architecture of today that Barcelona strives to be a materialization of. Built in 1912 by great architect Josep Puig i Cadafalch to hold the textil factory of the Casaramona family, it is one of the finest examples of industrial *modernista* architecture. It was bought by the powerful financial Catalan group La Caixa in the 1960s and restored to its original glory in the 1990s to adapt it to hold the cultural activities sponsored by the La Caixa foundation. The works done to the building, which happens to stand across the road from Mies van der Rohe Barcelona pavilion, include a new access to it

offering the kind of unique, coherent, commodifiable image that is necessary to compete in international markets and to produce the tourist experience. Moreover, this selective highlighting of the city's material past privileges the culture, and the history that gives voice to an industrial and modernizing bourgeoisie who had the good taste of financing the most avant-garde architectural forms of their time. In the meantime, other aspects of Barcelona's history have languished due to the scarcity of their preserved spaces of memory. Paramount amongst these is the industrial past from the perspective of the working classes, whose built heritage has not received comparable institutional or private support, except when it happened to be of *modernista* style.



Figure 3: Pavilions of the Finca Güell in the Pedralbes District, by Gaudí

designed by star architect Arata Isozaki. Isozaki was very conscious of the strategic location of his intervention, placed between a monument to local architecture and one of the most emblematic and influential buildings in modern architecture. And so, he designed his entrance explicitly as a mediation between the two. He says: "The vertical branches of trees mark the access to the center. As it is the case with natural trees, they branch out to make a complex structure in contrast to the regularity of Puig i Cadafalch' building façade. [...] While I was observing the discreet style of Van der Rohe's construction, I thought my way of working had to be even more discreet. [...] I could turn upside down the shape of Mies van der Rohe's pavilion and bury it so that, in order to get into CaixaForum, the visitor would have to penetrate a kind of underground garden. In this way, my work represents a mediation between the iron structure of the old factory and the utterly flat and simple finish of the Barcelona pavilion." (Fundación "La Caixa," 158 and 161) [MPB: My translation].



Figure 4: CaixaForum

This brings us to a discussion of unlucky, also known as obsolete, buildings. All processes of substitution or resignification of built environments—understood in their political, social, economic and symbolic complexity—originate in these being defined and catalogued by powerful parties as obsolete. Obsolescence denies any present value to the object of the past, and in so doing, it negates the capacity, or the right, of this object to produce or contain memory. It is around this category of obsolescence that some of the most complex struggles over urban space and the right of citizens to the city get generated. Obsolescence negates all continuity between the history of a place and its present, reducing it to an exhausted, meaningless past. Which explains why some struggles over the subsistence of these spaces are articulated around a claim to a collective memory, whose right to exist, it is argued, is being jeopardized. But invoking the past is never enough. Any claim against obsolescence necessitates, in order to articulate itself, a critical position about the present. To denounce the erasure of a built space, or to defend that what is left be preserved is to question the parameters that have allowed for such space to be deemed erasable: who made the decision, according to which and whose interests. Moreover, in order to be credible, claims against obsolescence need to have a concrete proposal ready for how to achieve an alternative future to the one that is being criticized. In the Barcelona of today, this kind of critical alternative discourse often focuses on the industrial heritage and purports to resist a process of urban transformation deemed as obedient only to the interests of a branded city.

Such is the case with the *SalvemCanRicart* [Let Us Save Can Ricart] platform, created by neighbours, local historians and architects to defend the conservation of the Can Ricart industrial compound in the neighbourhood traditionally known as Poble Nou and now renamed as the more fashionable 22@, threatened at least by partial demolition and substitution by an office tower. The case of Can Ricart is paradigmatic of the complex and contradictory ways in which issues of memory, class, sustainability and democracy can intersect to define what is the dominant, and what the resistant treatment of the built industrial heritage of Barcelona.



Figure 5: Can Ricart



Figure 6: Can Ricart

Members and supporters of SalvemCanRicart have strategically used in their arguments the very discourse of the local institutions, presumably with the intention of increasing their chances of succeeding:¹³

1. In the first place, by invoking architectural quality and uniqueness: as no other of its quality and nature remains in Barcelona, Can Ricart, the only factory compound from the XIX century preserved in full, is a unique, artistically and architecturally priceless example of industrial heritage, a symbol of modernity in Barcelona.

At an international level, knowledge and appreciation¹⁴ of industrial built environments and objects is part and parcel of the packaging and branding of postindustrial cities.¹⁵ With a wealth of industrial heritage,¹⁶ Barcelona can easily incorporate this trend as part of the marketing of its brand as a cultural tourist destination. Moreover, with a mayor's office proud of its ability to gain international acclaim through an urban transformation based on the quality¹⁷ of its spaces, the compatibility of SalvemCanRicart's first argument becomes clear. Even more, one would expect the Mayor's office to jump at the opportunity to capitalize on the claim of the SalvemCanRicart platform for the benefit of continuing to advance and perfect the Barcelona model/brand. More preserved buildings; better quality architecture will produce in turn better quality of life and a unique urban experience, all of which can be put at the service of producing and selling the spectacle of Barcelona to the potential tourist and/or investor, as well as to the dwellers. The problem is, the office of the mayor has expressed that it is not convinced that the architectural quality of the compound merits its preservation in full.

2. Second, by defending the economic viability: It is the perfect choice of space to hold the kind of clean and sustainable industries (IT, culture) recently promoted by local institutions for the area, as part of the move to a tertiary, post-industrial, sustainable economy.¹⁸

However, other economic interests conflict with those of the platform: in an area of "new centrality"¹⁹ as that of 22@, it is much more profitable for investors to build a tall office building. This will yield more profit per square meter and can potentially attract global investments and businesses. In the long run, this model can also produce clean, sustainable wealth for the area. The local government is inclined to accept this argument.

3. Third, by invoking the symbolic importance of memory in the construction of a collective identity, and the role of architectural heritage in this process: Can Ricart is necessary for the preservation of a collective memory –that of the working classes- that is different from the hegemonic one supported by *modernista* buildings, but equally significant to the local history.

At an ideological, and to a certain extent cynical level, all the up-to-date neglected and potentially subversive memory accumulated in the industrial heritage is easily neutralized as part of a history celebrating modernity, the dominant interpretation of Barcelona's history anyway. After all, the bourgeoisie, heroically represented in the narration told by the *modernista* heritage, makes sense only if thought in relation to its antagonist, the working class with whom it shared the spaces of production. Currently emblematic buildings in the *modernista* style such as those holding the museistic Fundació Tàpies (fig. 9) or the CaixaForum (fig. 4), originally conceived as spaces of production –printing house and textile factory, respectively–, could be legitimately appropriated for a history of Barcelona's working class.

¹³ See Can Ricart for more details.

¹⁴ Knowledge and appreciation that have been institutionalized as heritage studies in archeology, history and urban studies departments.

¹⁵ See Holcomb, Bianchini, Walsch, Hutton, Kearns and Philo. See Irving for a journalistic account of how Great Britain has consciously copied the Barcelona model. This is clear in the regeneration of the industrial past in cities such as Glasgow, Manchester or Liverpool.

¹⁶ Barcelona has been the industrial capital of Catalonia and the whole of Spain since the 18th century.

¹⁷ A urban transformation based on the quality but also based on, and characterized by its aestheticization as cultural industry for consumption in political, architectural, touristic, and social contexts.

¹⁸ See Ajuntament.

¹⁹ New centrality, *nueva centralidad* or *nova centralitat* is a concept that defines the areas of what used to be the marginal and neglected edges of the city, many of them by the sea, that are now becoming new city centers for living, working and playing. These include old industrial, working class neighbourhoods such as Poble Nou (now 22@).

4. Fourth, by aligning themselves with the most progressive implications of the Barcelona model: the full preservation of Can Ricart is what local residents, and not politicians or big corporations, want.

The origins of the Barcelona model go back to a period where local governments made decisions on urban planning in close and public consultation with social agents, with the aim of creating a better democratic city for its less favoured dwellers and in the public interest.²⁰ The Barcelona model is praised internationally, not only for the architectural and aesthetic quality of its spaces, but also in light of its progressive solutions in the creation of more social and public spaces. This is illustrated in the preservation, dating back to the 1980s but continuing up to this date, of industrial buildings, mostly factories, turned into public venues such as civic centers (fig. 7) or university halls (fig. 8). These are precedents where preservation of historic buildings has in fact enhanced the city's public services today while respecting the physical traces of a meaningful collective past.



Figure 7: Can Saladrigas

²⁰ More on this on Marshall, Calavita, Ferrer and also on Balibrea (2004).



Figure 8: Ca l'Aranyó

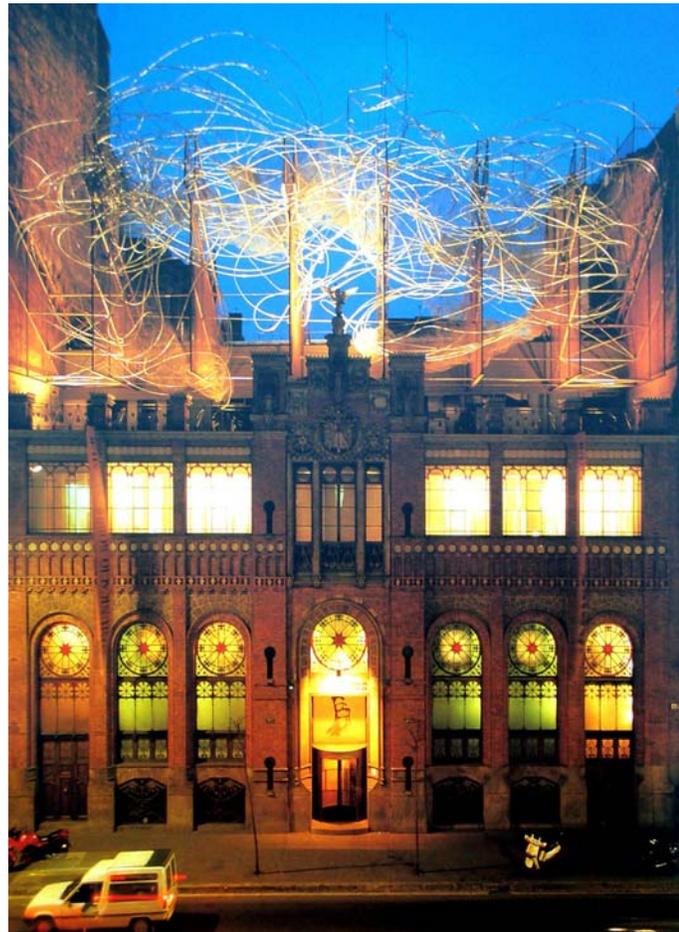


Figure 9: Fundació Tàpies

The local government has so far denied Can Ricart its full preservation.²¹ The outcome of this conflict is still to be resolved, with a social platform which so far has managed to have its voice heard and to stop all attempts at demolishing the compound. Still, this necessarily short paper has tried to show how the complexity with which the case of Can Ricart intersects with Barcelona's dominant trends of urban transformation, to reinforce them as well as to undermine and question them, proves the multiple and contradictory ways in which the history embedded in a built environment can influence the signification and development of a given social space.

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²¹ This state of affairs represents the situation as of the time of writing this paper, January of 2007.