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SUPER ISLANDS PROGRAM (2015 – 2024) AND THE HOUSING CRISIS IN BARCELONA.

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Resumo

Barcelona vem implementando uma política de eixos verdes e uma trama de espaços públicos e corredores ecológicos integrados, institucionalizadas pelo Programa Superilles (Superilhas). A justificativa é que práticas de urbanismo tático e ecoambiental são urgentes, frente às consequências da mudança climática, da precarização das condições ambientais, emissões poluentes e prioridade do automóvel, como meio de transporte urbano. Este conjunto de melhorias e políticas convive com aguda crise habitacional e forte alta dos preços imobiliários e locacionais, impelindo parte da população para bairros distantes das zonas consolidadas e outros municípios. Neste artigo, discute-se que esse processo recente de transformação urbano-metropolitana, com seus impactos socioambientais decorrentes do crescimento da cidade indica a urgência de um planejamento integrado multiescalar para enfrentar as carências socioespaciais, e suprir em conjunto a escassez de políticas, planos e projetos de habitação acessível. O marco do Plano Cerdà (1855-1859), de expansão da cidade medieval a fim de torná-la moderna, consiste em um dos principais antecedentes urbanísticos e ambientais da cidade; no entanto, as quadras desenhadas pelo plano, que deveriam conter espaços públicos verdes e permeáveis, foram com o tempo tomadas por construções, impondo ao tecido urbano de parte da cidade uma rigidez e características que contribuem para que a área consolidada não possa crescer. Os limites impostos pela morfologia do plano somam-se ao atual processo de intensificação do valor da terra e dos imóveis, bem como dos aluguéis, o que vem induzindo o crescimento periférico e um crescente deslocamento de população às regiões mais distantes do centro, amplificando o passivo ambiental e a necessidade de planejamento dessa expansão. 1

Palavras-chave: Política ecoambiental metropolitana. Redes. Desigualdade socioespacial.

Superilhas Program (2015 – 2024) and the housing crisis in Barcelona. A networked approach to conflicts of space production

Barcelona has been implementing a policy of green axes with a network of public spaces and integrated ecological corridors under the *Superilles* (Superblocks) Program. Tactical and eco-environmental urbanism practices are urgently needed in response to climate change, precarious environmental conditions, pollutant emissions, and the priority given to motor vehicles as a means of urban transportation. This suite of improvements and policies coexists with an acute housing crisis and soaring real-estate and rent prices, forcing a contingent of the population to move out into neighborhoods and cities far from consolidated areas. This article advocates that this recent process of urban-metropolitan transformation, with its socio-environmental impact of the city's growth, highlights the urgent need for integrated multi-scale planning to address socio-spatial deficiencies and lack of policies, plans, and projects for affordable housing. The Cerdà Plan (1855-1859), which expanded and modernized the medieval city, is one of Barcelona´s main urban and environmental antecedents. However, the blocks designed under the plan, intended to contain green permeable public spaces were, over time, built over. Consequently, the urban fabric of this part of the city has rigidity and characteristics that preclude further expansion of the consolidated area. The constraints imposed by the morphology of the plan add to the current process of rising land, real estate, and rent prices. This trend has been inducing peripheral growth and displacement of the local population to regions further out from the center, exacerbating environmental impacts and creating the need to manage this expansion.

Keywords: Metropolitan eco-environmental policy. Networks. Socio-spatial inequality.

El Programa Superislas (2015 – 2024) y la crisis de la vivienda en Barcelona. Un enfoque en red de los conflictos de la producción espacial

Barcelona viene implementando una política de ejes verdes y una red de espacios públicos y corredores ecológicos integrados, institucionalizada por el Programa Superilles. La justificación es que son urgentes prácticas de urbanismo táctico y ecoambiental, dadas las consecuencias del cambio climático, las precarias condiciones ambientales, las emisiones contaminantes y la prioridad del automóvil como medio de transporte urbano. Este conjunto de mejoras y políticas coexiste con una aguda crisis de vivienda y un fuerte aumento de los precios inmobiliarios y de los alquileres, empujando a parte de la población a barrios alejados de las zonas consolidadas y de otros municipios. En este artículo se argumenta que este reciente proceso de transformación urbano-metropolitana, con sus impactos socioambientales derivados del crecimiento de la ciudad, indica la urgencia de una planificación integrada y multiescalar para abordar las deficiencias socioespaciales, y abordar conjuntamente la escasez de políticas, planes y proyectos de vivienda asequible. El hito del Plan Cerdà (1855-1859), que amplió la ciudad medieval para hacerla moderna, constituye uno de los principales antecedentes urbanos y ambientales de la ciudad; Sin embargo, las manzanas diseñadas por el plan, que deberían contener espacios públicos verdes y permeables, fueron con el tiempo ocupadas por edificios, imponiendo una rigidez y unas características al tejido urbano de una parte de la ciudad que contribuyen a que el área consolidada no pueda crecer. A los límites que impone la morfología del plan se suman el actual proceso de intensificación del valor del suelo y de los inmuebles, así como de las rentas, que viene induciendo un crecimiento periférico y un creciente desplazamiento de población hacia regiones más alejadas del centro, amplificando el pasivo ambiental y la necesidad de planificar esta expansión.

Palabras clave: Política ecoambiental metropolitana. Redes. Desigualdad socioespacial.

1. Introduction

The city of Barcelona has been implementing a green axes policy – a network of public spaces and ecological corridors under the *Superilles* (Superblocks) Program, with the aim of adopting tactical[1] and eco-environmental urbanism practices in response to climate change, precarious environmental conditions from pollutant emissions, and priority given to motor vehicles as a means of transportation (Barcelona City Council, 2025). According to its creators, the Superblocks program has the potential to counter a series of urban-environmental vulnerabilities stemming from construction densification and socioeconomical and demographic flows in the consolidated city. The "Superblocks" were designed to control vehicular traffic flow in areas comprising 9 contiguous blocks, allowing optimal public use of space and preventing vehicles from circulating, except around them. This reduced flow of pollutant-emitting vehicles helps tackle climate change, ensure sustainable mobility, resolve the lack of green space, and foster equitable living conditions in the city, forming a complex ecosystem (Barcelona Regional, 2023).

The ecological policy was incorporated as a strategy into urban and city planning, with the aim of mitigating the environmental impact of urbanization, besides increasing preparedness for crises, such as the record drought event between 2021 and 2023[2] (ARA, 2024). There is also the goal of returning urban space to the people, whereupon pedestrians regain priority use of the streets, and public spaces, green areas, and public equipment address the shortcomings in the city identified by urban planners and public managers, in step with European, national and local environmental guidelines.

This ecosystem can be best described by the concept of networks. For the purposes of defining a network and its role in land planning at different levels, the authors concur with Santos (2009), who defined a network as an abstract device that denotes the material conditions and socio-spatial flows, associating them with the social reality. The flows and dynamics involving infrastructure, the transport of goods, consumables, energy and information are all part of networks, making up a topological fabric of points and nodes, characterizing these networks as sociotechnical (Egler Cohen, 2008), political, and ecological-environmental in nature.

This conceptualization suggests that developing a networked territory involves participation of social actors and technical-political decision-makers, legitimizing its abstract and concrete nature (Santos, 2009). Building on the definition of Milton Santos, the environmental paradigm modifies and expands this concept - with its concrete and

[1] Tactical urbanism is a type of urban planning and design that entails interventions to improve the quality of the environment and functionality of urban areas. These interventions, referred to as "tactics", articulate the city's land at a local level, restoring pedestrian mobility, and can therefore be temporary, flexible, and piloted before permanent implementation. Community participation is fundamental for effective implementation (Moreira, 2019).

[2] The drought depleted reservoir levels to below the record-low threshold seen in 1989. These extreme conditions led to the use of reclaimed water and desalination of seawater for supply (ARA, 2024).

abstract nature, networks are anthropically and socially created systems, such as the city and the planned territory, set against the natural flows of production and reproduction of the biome and the time-space inherent to nature, referred to as circuits (id., ibid.). A networked territory responds to productive and economic transformations, both material and immaterial, taking on a reticular structure (Gorz, 2005). As time-space systems, they define and activate points, lines, and surfaces, articulating physical-geographical connections. In this context, the concept can be expanded to include green and blue networks (Omitted for assessment, 2022), interconnecting them to sociotechnical communication networks and digital infrastructure (Web).

According to Santos (2009), urban and regional networks embody concepts such as diachrony and synchrony, alluding to historic remnants from the past, such as layers expressed by the morphology of the city that can be shaped by the urgency of new social movements, leading to reconfigurations of the space.

The notion of landscape, linked to the production of space as a continuum that, to be understood, needs to define boundaries and segments, and landscape units, can be related to the concepts developed by Santos (idem, ibid.) and to a vision of territory grounded in the humanistic ecology of landscape (Metzger, 2001). Based on social and individual interaction with the environment, as well as the product of a set of intentions and needs, this ecological conception can acquire materiality and expression in territorial planning. The social action advocated by Santos occurs in space-time, since place is the precondition of events (Omitted for evaluation, 2021), and the Ecology of the Landscape with a geographical bias is revealed as inter- and multi-scalar, also including the local level, inferred by a subset of multiple connected scales.

In the Catalan capital, integrated networked planning within a metropolitan context has been underway since implementation of the Metropolitan General Plan in 1976 (PGMB, 2024). A brief examination of some of these processes showing migrations from central to peripheral areas explains the exodus of local residents from the city center out to other districts in the city (Pla pel dret a l'habitatge de Barcelona, 2016 – 2025), highlighting the need for multi-scalar city planning. The shifts in population, but into central zones and out to peripheral belts, suggest that the housing shortage has occurred in both urban and metropolitan areas. In 2018, the Metropolitan Rehabilitation Plan (2020-2030) was approved in a bid to start addressing, at least in part, the demand for housing in the outer belt (*Pla Metropolità de Rehabilitació* 2020-2030).

In 2016, the Barcelona Metropolitan Housing Observatory (O-HB) was launched by the City Council and Metropolitan Area, managed by the Provincial Council of Barcelona and the *Generalitat* (autonomous government). Its establishment shows that the solution to urban problems should include metropolitan management, with social participation and transparency of information. Since 2015, under the *Plan por el Derecho a la Vivienda de Barcelona* (*Barcelona Right to Housing Plan*) (2016-2025), the issue was made a public priority, amid data exposing the tiny percentage of public housing stock, accounting for only 2% of the city´s housing versus 15% overall for EU countries, besides a substantial number of evictions due to bank repossessions, also revealing difficulties meeting rent payments. The Plan sought to secure the social function of housing as a public service (Barcelona City Council, 2024).

A Metropolitan Network of Residential Exclusion (XMIR) was set up as a forum for dialogue between housing managers and entities in the metropolitan region, part of the Citizen Agreement, to work on an intermunicipal front and implement joint actions. These

actions support the initial hypothesis of the importance of debate and of providing a means of redressing socioterritorial imbalances and inequalities within this network.

These considerations indicate that a systemic, and above all, ecological view, as sought by Barcelona, hinges on a multi-scalar approach, connectivity, and municipal-regional relationships. Thus, by definition, the Superblocks Program envisages a systemic action prioritizing connectivity, over and above the existing urban environment. In this context, scale is identified with a system: it is not a cartographic definition, nor does scale alone determine a spatial segment or a territorial complex; instead the system and spatial segment together define the scale (Omitted for evaluation, 2021).

While this environmental policy rolls out in urban and metropolitan networks, the green axes traverse these scales ensuring the connectivity necessary for biome protection and conferring the quality envisaged for the environment, concomitant socio-spatial inequalities, driven by soaring real estate prices and the escalation of rents, also emerge. The increased flow of people and motor vehicles, coupled with soaring land and real estate prices, is accompanied by increased environmental impact as a result of expansion of peri-urban areas, which begin to accommodate citizens seeking housing where land is more affordable.

The raft of environmental improvements and public space policies cooccur with a housing crisis and spike in real-estate prices and rent values. This "double whammy" has driven a contingent of the population to neighborhoods far from the consolidated zone into the metropolitan regions and adjacent cities. In August 2024, the number of users of public transport rose 3.7% relative to the same month in 2023, urban transport increased 5.3% year on year, while interurban transport rose 3.4%. These figures reveal an increase in commutes (INE, 2024) and land use in peripheral areas, which face potential environmental impact with a rise in construction, solid waste, and pollution.

The environment program outlined, besides coexisting with the housing shortage, faces a limited supply of public housing, including new building projects and restoration of existing buildings in districts within the consolidated area, revealing a synchrony of urban improvements and environmental and urban vulnerabilities. According to city authority data, 15,000 buildings (2% of Barcelona´s buildings) were designated as government-run housing in the city, or as having subsidized rent. The target is 15%, to bring rates in line with the average for other European cities. In 2015, the official council housing stock stood at 7,550 units, showing that meeting the target in the short-term posed a major challenge (Barcelona City Council, 2024).

Inequality of access to urban land and to housing has grown, exacerbated by processes involving, among other factors, neoliberal urban production exerting antagonistic effects (Rolnik, in Institut Municipal de l'Habitatge i Rehabilitació de Barcelona, 2019).

In the present article, the need for networked (intersectoral) integrated planning on a metropolitan scale is advocated to address the environmental impact and socio-spatial shortcomings of territorial dynamics and conflicts manifested in policies, plans and projects for affordable housing. In parallel, the Barcelona is witnessing a process of gentrification, with city residents moving to other areas further out from the center, which then suffer the adverse environmental effects of this growth. In this context, the concept of gentrification (Smith, 1982) can be the production of uneven development, brought about by the socio-spatial substitution of lower social strata by others engaged in service activities, accompanied by the displacement of the replaced population. It is argued that inter-scalar planning is a necessity, since the contradictions that have produced this

gentrification and expansion into the metropolitan domain cause environmental impact, adding to the problems faced by peripheral regions.

The framework of the Cerdà Plan (1855-1859) for the modernization and expansion of the medieval city is one of the main urbanistic and environmental antecedents of the city explored in the text and a key factor explaining the current expansion into the metropolitan fringes. The blocks designed under the plan, originally devoted to public permeable green spaces have, over time, been built up, conferring the urban fabric a rigidity in terms of use (height limits cannot be changed) and characteristics preventing further growth of the consolidated city, hampering new building projects, and precluding solutions to the housing shortage. The concept of the Superblocks should be interpreted in the context of changing occupation and uses, particularly within the Eixample (district created by Cerdà in his expansion of the medieval city). At the time of its implementation, the Cerdà plan proposed a strong link between urban form and hygienist health promotion, and was a pivotal factor in its creation (Barcelona Regional, 2023). Superblocks seek to revive the unrealized hygienist designs and environmental improvements, and mitigate frustration with the partial implementation of the original plan by the engineer Cerdà, specifically in terms of green spaces and open areas.

The limits imposed by the incompleteness and morphology of the plan, are compounded with other factors exacerbating environmental impacts, where the rising price of land, property and rent have prompted periphery growth and an exodus of the population to areas further out from the center, increasing the need for comprehensive planning of those areas subject to these expansion dynamics. It is also argued that the inclusion of the ecological and environmental paradigm in planning, with impact on urban design and new proposals for public spaces and mobility is paramount, allowing many of the unrealized environmental precepts of Cerdà´s Superblocks to be fulfilled. This positive approach, however, occurs amid the conflicts outlined, calling for new ways of comprehensively planning the territory as a system (GOMES, 2014).

The conflicts observed revolve around the effects of a multifactorial transformation of the city, and the Superblocks program emerges as a timely solution for expanding public areas and enhancing the environmental quality of the city via its reticular systems of green axes, public spaces, and reduced emissions, helping to counter environmental impacts and preserve health[3]. Concomitant with the benefits of this green network, environmental improvements made under the scheme - a factor driving up land prices - may be prompting expansion of the city into the peripheral belts, potentially exacerbating the housing deficit. This shortage has multiple causes, including a limited supply of land plots, a historical lag in policies for council housing provision in Spain, and specialization of land use within the consolidated area, calling for tighter municipal and regional planning. Metropolitan network-based planning, both challenging and complex, emerges as a strategy to reverse the effects of the public housing deficit through a raft of plans and policies for production

[3] The redevelopment of the *Plaza de las Glòries* represents a standout example of this transformation; an intersection of urban roadways, now rerouted underground, plus a large parking lot (demolished), have been transformed into a public environment featuring a clean-energy intermodal station - a light rail system (recently inaugurated) - constituting one of the main nodes of the ecological network and Superblock under construction (elPeriódico, 2024).

and financing that coordinate land use for the provision of ecological services, mobility, transportation, and housing.

The present study explores the factors propagating inequalities and environmental impacts by analyzing primary data, and examines current access to housing in Barcelona, supporting the case for network-based planning. Possible effects of the Superblock Program on the pattern of residential use are highlighted, drawing on public sources that show a rise in cost of land, real-estate property, and rents within regions where the program is being implemented.

The results show that, while implementing green axes and Superblocks is a valid approach to mitigate the adverse effects of environmental problems brought on by the impacts of climate, patterns of land use, and determinants of urban form, these improvements can drive up prices in the formal city and expansion into the outer suburbs, worsening the housing shortage and mobility issues, and calling for management instruments and mechanisms to redress the socio-spatial inequality on urban and regional levels.

2. Barcelona, a consolidated global city – compactness and urban sprawl amid environmental policy

The financialization of the economy, which encourages business models based on real-estate funds and similar financial assets, is one of the main factors behind the decline in housing policy at both urban and regional levels. This approach limits access to housing by underprivileged social groups and weakens the welfare state in Europe and the United States (Harvey, 2013). The intense commodification of real-estate assets plus rapid growth in this economic sector, along with financial flows that enable capital to move from real-estate assets to investments in transnational securities markets (id., ibid.) relativizes investment and its destination, oscillating between securities, new real-estate assets, and encouraging demand for leasing. When there is a flight of capital for financial investment, together with a housing shortage in consolidated and valued areas, the demand for housing by less favored social strata increases, who then move out to more distant areas. This characterizes the real-estate and land dynamics in urban consolidated areas, a phenomenon not exclusive to European capitals. In Brazil, short-term rental businesses, such as Airbnb – thriving in Barcelona - are growing rapidly, a process accompanied by high land prices and displacement of affected populations. [4]

The production and financing of real-estate products are inseparable from the financialized circuit, which is driven by multiple means of capital remuneration and has significant impacts on economic and social relations (id., ibid.). Financialization should not be solely seen as the finance sector´s priority in the economy, but rather as a constellation

[4] It should be noted, however, that this does not mean that the impacts of Airbnb on the real-estate market in general and on the rental market specifically, on tourist flows, and on the daily life of residents in the most affected cities in the country, are not relevant. On the contrary. Analyses of case studies in Brazil have increased in recent years, showing that neoliberal urbanism supported by short-term rental platforms—especially Airbnb—has had consequences that require careful assessment (Cruz; Baumgaertner, 2024, p. 1).

of factors acting on multiple dimensions, including financialized spatial practices that affect other aspects, ranging from urbanization to daily life (Sanfelici, 2013).

The subprime and mortgage crisis, triggered by the mass circulation of mortgage-backed securities in the United States (2008), exemplifies financialization, underpinned by real-estate production (Harvey, 2013). This can be explained by the chain granting of high-risk mortgage loans, which led to the devaluation of stock exchanges, the centers for trading global securities. The counterpart of an overheated financial circuit may be the intensification of real-estate investments by international, national, and local investors seeking profits through buying, selling, and rentier practices.

The mass granting of mortgage credit and insolvent securities on stock exchanges affected the housing market in many countries, increasing the trading of these instruments in financial markets and worsening the distribution of income and housing, leading to a change in the patterns of access to housing. According to the Global City Investment Monitor (Barcelona in Numbers, 2020), Barcelona was ranked seventh city in the world in 2018 for foreign investment received, highlighting the global circulation of resources.

Also, according to INCASOL (Catalan Land Institute, 2024), Barcelona had 589,272 properties in 2023, of which 290,417 were rented. The Institute regulates the registration and contracts of all rental properties in Catalonia, overseeing the rights and obligations of leases. Of these properties for rent, 36% were corporate-owned, and 38 of these companies held over 300 properties each, revealing a concentration of real-estate among few owners, and that this type of business represented one of the leading economic activities in the city.

The financialized logic has been understood as one of the mechanisms behind the retraction of public housing policy (Rolnik, 2019) in the countries of Europe and Latin America (id., ibid.). In European countries, including Spain, the appreciation of real-estate assets and rising prices, coupled with the advance of global digital real-estate platforms such as Airbnb, among others, have heated the financialized real-estate circuit, affecting not only property ownership but also rental values, making living in the central area of Barcelona unaffordable. The incumbent city mayor, Jaume Collboni, announced a move to ban Airbnb from operating, effective in November 2028 (BBC News Brasil, 2024). The decision comes at a time when Airbnb has been identified as "Barcelona´s biggest problem" (id., ibid., s.p.), blaming the platform for the housing crisis. The growing influx of occupation of consolidated urban space is one of the factors driving up land and property prices in the city center, proving a highly attractive venue for local residents, tourists and visitors. However, this increase in flow of people and vehicles has been cited as worsening environmental vulnerability, with gray infrastructure given precedence over free areas, besides both green and blue spaces, exacerbating the environmental problems associated with intense occupation.

Across Spain, and in Barcelona itself, homeowners struggling to meet mortgage payments has forced some social groups and strata to rent properties, both individually and corporately owned. More profitable forms of rental, such as Airbnb, have been boosted by the increasing tourist exploitation.

The crisis also stems from the fact that Spain is the country in the European Union with the 5th lowest stock of council housing. There is a major gap between the number of households and homes needed and the supply of newbuilds, with a 38% rise in the number of families resorting to renting as a remedy for their housing problem (Culmia, Access to Housing in Spain, 2023).

The rise in prices affects not only Barcelona but has spread to other cities in the country, resulting in a wholesale increase in values over the last decade. Average household spending on rent has risen (2015-2022) by 27.7% (FUNCAS, 2022). Prices have outpaced the average increase in household income (16.6% among families with a single earner and 22% among those with two or more) (id., ibid.). The situation deteriorate after the pandemic. Prior to 2020, three out of 10 households spent over 30% of their income on rent, rising to four out of 10 post-pandemic (id., ibid.). According to the Idealista Real-Estate Portal (2024), Barcelona is the city that spends most on rent as a proportion of salary (around 43% compared to the maximum acceptable level of 30%)(FUNCAS 2022).

These figures can be explained by the high number of foreigners (Europeans) choosing Barcelona as a place to purchase holiday homes and permanent residences. In 2023, sales to foreigners peaked in the decade (19% of all sales, a level last reached during the 2014-2017 period), driven by sales to resident foreigners. Figures for the first quarter of 2024 showed that foreigners continued to represent a significant share of real-estate transactions, amid a slight uptick in sales to Spanish citizens. Notably, in 2024, foreign residents accounted for 30% of Barcelona´s population, with the international community driving the recent demographic growth in the city, with one foreigner for every four residents (Barcelona Internacional Welcome, 2024).

Table 1 Place of origin of Barcelona residents (1991-2023)

	Cataluña	Misma comarca	Otra comarca	Resto de España	Extranjero	Total
2023	908.315	812.106	96.209	235.308	512.333	1.655.956
2022	915.943	820.235	95.708	242.779	456.402	1.615.124
2021	927.909	830.857	97.052	251.488	448.162	1.627.559
2011	957.743	859.412	98.331	314.615	338.655	1.611.013
2001	993.280	890.488	102.792	385.678	124.926	1.503.884
1996	1.018.496	908.194	110.302	432.033	58.276	1.508.805
1991	1.108.969	979.610	129.359	496.314	38.259	1.643.542

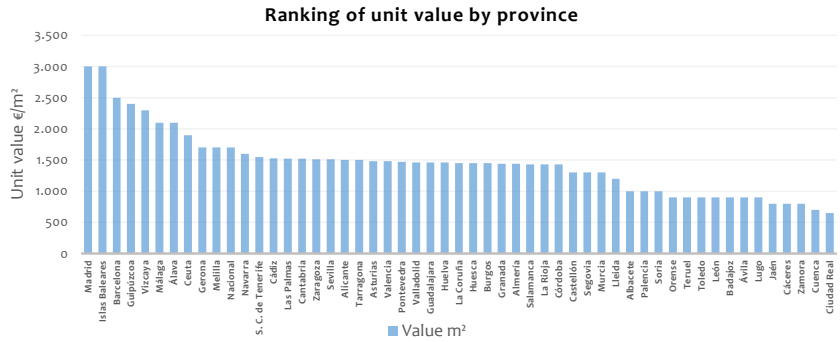
Source: IDESCAT.cat (2023)

Comentado [AD1]: Catalonia Same district Other district Rest of Spain Foreign Total

TROCA "." -> "," para os dados numericos

In 2024, a total of 572,459 of Barcelona residents were born overseas. Currently 33.6% of the city´s population are foreigners (Barcelona City Council, 2024), while 43.2% have higher education.

Graph 1 Unit values by province – Barcelona ranks third in cost per m^2



Source: Report for Q2 2024 CCAA · PROVINCES · CAPITALS. TINSA Research, 2024.

The most expensive Spanish cities per square meter are San Sebastián (4,268 €/m2), Madrid (3,833 € €/m2) and Barcelona (€3,722/m2), followed by Palma de Mallorca (€2,837/m2), Bilbao (€2,754/m2), Cádiz (€2,438/m2) and Málaga (2,391 €/m2) (TINSA Research, INFORME 2, 2024). In the capital of Catalonia, rents have risen in upscale districts, such as Eixample and Gràcia, as well as Sant Martí in the eastern zone, historically home to the textiles industry, practically extinguished by deindustrialization, giving way to a "new" area which now houses the 22@Barcelona Innovation District.

The new area was prompted by the demand for advanced services, which manifest in the form of specialized land uses. This specialization occurred as a primarily corporate area was established, helping to attract investment in infrastructure and boosting the value of this part of the city, further contributing to the urban crisis.

This territorial production logic led to the establishment of almost exclusively corporate uses within the historic Urban Innovation District – 22@Barcelona. The district was launched in 2000, resulting in a predominance of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) companies, elevated property values in the corporate sector, and in a commercial as opposed to residential focus, with less priority still on council housing. A survey conducted in 2018 (id., ibid.) found that the city had more spaces for non-residential uses, such as tourist accommodation or offices (13,852) than for housing (id., ibid.).

The Plan for the Innovation District envisaged 4,000 social housing units, an amount that soon proved insufficient to promote effective mixed use (Omitted for evaluation, 2023). From 2018 (Repensen22@,2018), one of the measures taken by City Council to increase the contingent of affordable housing throughout the city was to rule that at least 30% of new private development and renovation projects must be dedicated to popular housing, in a bid to address the shortage (Housing and Rehabilitation Forum of Barcelona, 2019).

Transformations that have made the city a hub for global business, innovation and culture (as evidenced in 22@) have driven up land values and real-estate and rental prices, possibly a reason for the diaspora of social sectors to peripheral areas in search of decent housing and livelihoods.

It follows that the predominance of corporations and hotels in the region, coupled with the demand in the real-estate market for buildable land, has increased the role of private developers in the production of the city. As noted by Zaar, 86 of the 141 approved plans

were executed by the private sector, and among these, licenses were granted to build 691,291 m² of above-ground floor space for productive activity (Zaar, 2023, p. 129).

As a result of the mobility of companies, albeit concentrated in the 22@ or searching for other regions of the city or municipalities, this generalized corporate shift constitutes another cause of the rising prices leading to inequalities of access to the city (id., ibid.).

The 22@ Barcelona Plan warrants mention in the context of factors incentivizing the urban crisis, for its contribution to the shortage of affordable housing in the consolidated city.

Given these processes, there is a pressing need to curb the soaring prices of rent and real-estate property, amid the housing crisis which has galvanized social sectors (Montaner, 2019). The most recent amendment to the 22@ comes in the form of the Targeted Modification of the Metropolitan General Plan for a more inclusive and sustainable 22@ (Zaar, 2023). Despite the inclusion of sustainability in the addendum to the Metropolitan Plan, in addition to the aim of making the region better equipped to address the ecological transition, contradictions involving low-value expropriations and the price escalation caused by the appreciation of land and property, hinder the access of former residents to affordable housing, whether private or public.

In 2022, the Urban Subcommittee of Barcelona approved amendments to the Metropolitan General Plan (PGM) based on the results of Repensen 22@, with a proposal and strategy for Urban Regeneration to consolidate the existing highly valuable socio-cultural resources. With an emphasis on business use, the changes center on transforming the territory to mixed-use, through an inclusive sustainable approach. This concerted effort to rework the plan has prompted the community to become more engaged in the urban planning side, bringing to the fore the needs of the Sant Martí district and exposing the housing deficit, while highlighting that corporate and economic priority must be counterbalanced by green areas and facilities such as daycare centers, civil centers and housing.

Despite efforts to increase the proportion of residential use in the district, currently, over one million square meters have been earmarked for economic activities up to 2030, generating new jobs (Metrópoli, 2022). The specialization of this territory, together with its focus on corporate and job creation, remains a priority for a deindustrialized city seeking to rebuild its productive fabric.

While the problems of the housing deficit and affordable homes worsens, a priority program such as the Superblocks is being implemented to create ecological connectivity and restore living conditions, constituting a paradox – improved environmental quality yet less access to the city. This paradox indicates worsening inequality, particularly among younger generations, who are unable to get on the housing ladder at prevailing mortgage prices or to meet the cost of rent, effectively delaying the age of independence and increasing the likelihood of this group leaving the central zone for peri-urban areas or other cities.

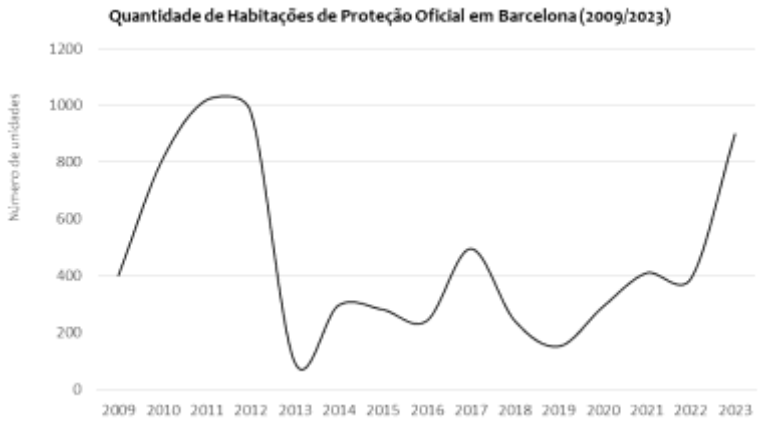
Graph 2 Rise in Barcelona rent prices, 2009-2023. Average price 1,136.4 euros | month

Source: Barcelona Provincial Council – INDI_MHAB, 2024 https://media.diba.cat/diba/indicadors-habitatge/index.html

The time-series reveals the positive impact of council housing provision policies, with an upward trend in the number of houses completed in 2023, highlighting the lack of this type of housing development, and the stark decline between 2013 and 2021.

Graph 3 Number of Council Houses started and completed in Barcelona, 2009-2023

Comentado [AD2]: Number of Council Houses in Barcelona, 2009-2023



Source: Barcelona Provincial Council – INDI_MHAB, 2024
https://media.diba.cat/diba/indicadors-habitatge/index.html

Escalating urban rents, particularly in the consolidated districts of Barcelona, have followed the pattern presented in Table 2.

Table 2: rental contract market in Barcelona by district (2023)

Average monthly rent (€/month)

		2023				2023 (cumulative)			
	DISTRICT	1Q	2Q	3Q	4Q	1Q	2Q	3Q	4Q
	BARCELONA	1,087.30	1,123.60	1,171.30		1,087.30	1,105.00	1,124.60	
1	Ciutat Vella	1,054.00	1,063.60	1,104.90		1,054.00	1,058.70	1,071.70	
2	Eixample	1,214.50	1,276.40	1,292.70		1,214.50	1,245.50	1,260.60	
3	Sants-Montjuïc	1,015.90	1,025.90	1,027.60		1,015.90	1,020.60	1,022.40	
4	Les Corts	1,190.20	1,272.80	1,363.30		1,190.20	1,232.80	1,272.00	
5	Sarrià-Sant Gervasi	1,442.40	1,553.60	1,668.80		1,442.40	1,498.50	1,546.80	
6	Gràcia	1,091.70	1,099.90	1,149.40		1,091.70	1,095.70	1,110.40	
7	Horta-Guinardó	880.90	909.20	922.10		880.90	894.30	902.30	
8	Nou Barris	762.50	796.20	804.80		762.50	779.30	786.60	
9	Sant Andreu	878.50	876.60	940.70		878.50	877.60	896.40	
10	Sant Martí	1,084.30	1,064.70	1,138.10		1,084.30	1,075.20	1,096.40	

Source: Department of Statistics and Data Dissemination, Barcelona City Council. Government of Catalonia, based on data from INCASOL

The conflicting process involving the coexistence of urban and environmental improvement, periphery expansion, and the housing crisis, is underpinned by multi-scalar relations of the production of contemporary urban space, requiring a grasp of the different scales to fully understand the phenomenon and plan the territory. These relationships can be elucidated by analyzing the broader factors influencing the different scales, including the impact of city transformation in the context of globalized economic-financial circuits (Harvey, 2013), acting at regional and local levels and triggering a rise in the price of land and cost of housing, as outlined earlier.

To mitigate the environmental impacts of the densely built-up high-end consolidated areas resulting from past urban plans, together with tourist exploitation and rent-seeking, Barcelona has been developing a new planning cycle, embodied by the Superblocks Program, encompassing the entire urbanized area and road network. This initiative seeks to create an ecologically adequate public space, while recouping some of the space previously dominated by motor vehicles for use by citizens. Green squares and centers, metropolitan ecological corridors, complemented by tactical urbanism interventions, form a metropolitan-scale network, accompanying the city´s expansion and ecological and environmental connectivity.

3. Green axes and Superblocks Program: eco-environmental policy and land valorization

The environmental-ecological policy is part of the framework of the 2020 Barcelona Biodiversity and Green Plan, which embraces green and blue infrastructure as an element of a network, combining urban, environmental, social and economic aspects.
Green corridors underpin urban-ecological connectivity, remedying the discontinuity between urban infrastructure and natural blue and green areas that may otherwise be isolated. The notion that ecological infrastructure is a system that supports reproduction of the biome is the underlying principle of this policy, where this network has been defined

as indispensable for urban life (2020 Barcelona Biodiversity and Green Plan), providing maximum connectivity.

The 2021-2030 Barcelona Nature Plan (Decidim Barcelona, 2024) centers on municipal government commitments with citizen participation to preserve biological diversity. Different projects aim to conserve, expand, and strengthen green and blue infrastructure: in Action 18, "Working transversally across municipal and metropolitan spheres," and in Action 20, "Working with the network of entities and organizations to foster biodiversity" (2021-2030 Barcelona Nature Plan , p. 106), there is a call for the provision of Parks and Gardens with ecological management, based around a reticular structure. Barcelona Tree Management Plan (2017-2037) was also devised. Given the average lifespan of a tree is 50 years; in order to encourage diversity of local plants adapted to the ecological connection and replacing ornamental species, a long-term Strategic Plan provides for the maintenance, diversification and replacement of trees. Thus, "A tree canopy conceived as a functional network helps connect the green spaces of the cities with the forest and riverine ecosystems surrounding Barcelona, creating a more integrated uniform green landscape and enhancing biodiversity by acting as a corridor connecting open spaces" (Tree Management Plan, 2024, p. 7).

The network transcends administrative and urban boundaries to act, by definition, at the metropolitan level. The connectivity of the green network (and the blue network comprising urban water systems, catchment areas, and riparian zones)(Omitted for evaluation, 2021) allows living organisms to circulate within the anthropically-modified environment, thereby replicating ecological flows and processes (2020 Barcelona Biodiversity and Green Plan).

The Superblocks Program was designed to integrate with this network, as a model for urban-ecological transition encompassing the city and its peri-urban fringes and municipal regions in the metropolitan area, to change this spatial system to pedestrian-friendly spaces as opposed to dominated by private motor vehicles (see Figure 1 showing connectivity of proposed green corridor network and surrounding natural environment). The impacts of a mobility model in which priority is given to private motor vehicles are not limited to atmospheric pollution alone, as the space taken up by cars is unavailable for use by citizens (Barcelona City Council, Superblocks, 2023). The goal is therefore to provide quality public space, with the aim of promoting safety, social interactions, and the local economy. The green centers and squares provide the building blocks for creating the ecological axes and corridors, constituting the core initiatives of the Program (id., ibid.).

Modern-day Barcelona, with its long history of development, is an extensive urban fabric which has grown beyond its old city walls. During the 19th century, the engineer Cerdà implemented this expansion plan (Eixample), with the approval of city´s central government in the mid-nineteenth century, based on an 1855 topographical survey conducted by Cerdà.

Figure 1 Network of green corridors and connectivity with green and blue infrastructure

Source: Map of potential green corridors within the metropolitan area of Barcelona. (ICTA-UAB), https://www.escolasert.com/es/blog/cursos-urbanismo.

The Plan developed the urban fabric by reproducing blocks with chamfered edges on all four sides, embodying the image of a modern city. Regarding the flat expanse of Barcelona as a territory of opportunity, and moving beyond its old boundaries, the New Plan Decree (Villaescusa, 2022) regulated the appropriation of an area that extended eastwards to the Besòs River, but failed to reach as far as the Llobregat River to the west, indicating that the scope of the plan was largely administratively based along geometric lines, overlooking the natural hydrological and geographical boundaries.

Free spaces Program under the Cerdà Plan (Omitted for evaluation, 2023).

The environmental aims of the Cerdà Plan manifest in the layouts of green areas, where trees are dispersed among open blocks. Although natural hydrological boundaries were not fully respected, the plan sought to mitigate the increase in building density with these resources. The land area available to accommodate the growing city was the determining factor of the plan, and the new city extended based on a grid layout.

The Superblocks and ecological corridors form another type of city connection with the metropolitan area through a multiaxial structure of green centers and nodes, deployable in the same way that Cerdà expanded the modern city by multiplying the blocks. The city aims to integrate the Superblocks into a new mobility plan, cutting vehicular traffic by b21%, while converting 60% of street spaces, hitherto dedicated to roadways and car parking, into spaces for public use. Another objective is to reduce the annual death toll from air pollution, and lower noise to within legally permitted levels (id., ibid.).

After initial implementation of the Program in several pilot areas, such as Poblenou, Horta, and Sant Antoni (central area), the Superblocks have been rolled out to other areas,

gaining in quality and speed, laying down ecological corridors across the city and region, and creating pedestrian-friendly green squares (Barcelona City Council, 2024). This network is redrawing the map of the region starting from the city (Figure 2) based on Cerdà's blocks for the Eixample, replicating the network of green streets and squares as a cultural, morphological, and symbolic premise for an innovative vision of urbanism that is both comprehensive and tactical.

Figure 2 Green Axes Plan

Source: https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/eixample/ca/noticia/el-consell-de-barri-de-la-dreta-explica-la-superilla-barcelona-i-el-projecte-del-tramvia_1062566

The area occupied by the Cerdà blocks has a high volume of motor vehicle traffic, resulting in greater pollution and higher noise levels, with significant health impacts for residents. Due to its highly built-up nature, the area also has the fewest green spaces. The Superblocks allow vehicle circulation and mobility to be reorganized, creating squares at intersections, with a square or green building at least every 200 meters , thereby increasing space for social interaction.

Figure 3 Superblock in Sant Antonì – public space

Source: https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/superilles/en/content/the-new-green-hubs-and-squares.

In his proposal, Cerdà experimented with different ways of occupying the blocks , building around them and making the interior space available for squares and gardens, varying this occupancy on one, two, or three sides of the polygon formed by each block. Another goal of the plan was also to improve mobility and circulation of traffic. Chamfered blocks were designed, allowing greater use of sidewalks and 35-meter-wide streets and 50-80 meter-wide avenues, conferring uniquely shaped road intersections, some for vehicles and others for pedestrians, while providing public green spaces and gardens.

The contemporary version of the Cerdà Plan (Superblocks) envisages places for mingling and recreational use by the community, catering to diverse groups such as children, women with young children, and older adults, as well as the general population, remaining faithful to the original design for the Eixample (see Figure 3).

In practice, due to real-oestate pressures during its implementation, the Cerdà Plan failed to meet its environmental objectives (permeable blocks, designed to meet environmental requirements are depicted in Figure 4). Few interior spaces of the blocks remained accessible, becoming enclosed by buildings, leaving, when possible, internal courtyards to provide sunlight and ventilation, in the multiple repeated blocks.

Figure 4 Ildefonso Cerdà model for utilization of city blocks (manzanas) and implementation of green squares

Source: http://www.anycerda.org/web/es/activitats/debat-i-reflexio/Inauguracio-del-cicle-Cerda-enginyer-arquitecte-de-la-ciutat-

Figure 5 Cerdà urban grid in Eixample and Superblock with green areas.

Source: https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/superilles/en/

Beyond these shortcomings, brought about by the urban structure that was propagated, along with real-estate expansion and lack of public spaces, current urban demands reveal not only a lack of space for the city to breathe, but also a housing shortage and search for cheaper land for housing that exacerbate these vulnerabilities. It is reasonable to suppose that these processes of population displacement to the outer regions of the metropolitan belt are further deepened by a combination of factors adding to the dynamics driven by mass tourism, global-scale business, and the services-oriented city, rendering this a space of global economic flows, as opposed to a place to settle and live. However, the very morphological conditions of the consolidated city, coupled with difficulties accessing housing and property appreciation promoted by environmental improvements, complete the picture of vulnerabilities.

Notwithstanding, although the Superblocks constitute a promising environmental and mobility proposal, this has been offset by escalating land, housing, and rental values (Metrópoli Abierta, 2024). While the benefits of the Program are clear, the resultant price

speculation in the target areas is a major issue. For example, the selling price of property in Dreta de l'Eixample has risen 11.3% (Idealista, 2023), reaching €6,636 per square meter in March of this year. The average selling price for the region as a whole is €5,000 per square meter, ranging from €3,700 to €6,000.

According to real-estate market analyses, the Superblocks will lead to a generalized increase in prices as a result of the associated urban transformation and improvements, amid the shift towards pedestrian mobility and implementation of green axes, squares, and gardens. However, implementation of the program is pivotal to enabling connectivity of the metropolis with its surroundings and, consequently, to enhancing the environmental quality of the region.

The price appreciation of the districts is one of the most acute problems related to the scheme, a concern voiced by local homeowners' associations. By improving public and urban space, cutting pollution levels through the introduction of greenery and rerouting of vehicles, the Superblocks and their adjacent streets become more sought after, with perverse effects for lower-income populations, such as gentrification and displacement to outlying regions.

4. Final considerations

Barcelona, in consolidating global cultural and economic practices, particularly those inherent to a services-oriented city with mass tourism, now faces the socio-spatial conflicts described throughout this article. The circulation of wealth, driven by the real-estate and rentier market and global investment circuits, has led to gentrification of the consolidated city, accompanied by land appreciation and a housing deficit, promoting expansion to outlying suburbs. The dual move toward expansion, coupled with a return to the compact city, has led to the search for different ways of increasing the housing stock to meet this demand. This two-pronged approach reflect the lack of housing, facilities, and public spaces, along with the quest for better environmental conditions. Notably, this centrifugal centripetal dynamic stems from both urban space dynamics and urban and territorial policies adopted, as well as the disparate approaches and values of successive strategic plans and the contexts in which they were devised.

In the 1990s, with the transformations of hosting the Olympic Games, the strategic plan focused on the development of the metropolis as a cultural space and venue for international tourism. During a second phase, with the introduction of the 22@Barcelona Plan (2000), the city was geared up for technological innovation and knowledge production. More recently, a shift in vision and values has led to advancement of the strategy to embrace the impact of ecological transition and vital control of the effects of climate change and mass tourism, issues being addressed through the Superblocks Program. The environmental variable introduced by the urgency of the issue has placed ecological connectivity front and center in the city's survival, and its relationship with the metropolitan region.

While these strategies influence urban dynamics, environmental standards, quality of life, and land use, the enduring presence of the Cerdà grid across much of the city has imposed a rigid structure and fixed patterns of occupation, resulting in a loss of urban plasticity and shaping Barcelona as a 'finished' city. These conditions result in a city constrained by this design and the heavy presence of motor vehicles, raising pollutant

emissions to levels exceeding allowed limits under European Union guidelines, a situation aggravated by climate change and requiring imminent action to enhance environmental quality.

The current dynamic promotes market forces of rising land and property prices dominating production of urban space in Barcelona, and likewise in other cities. As pressures exerted by various stakeholders on urban space production intensify, a networked policy becomes a key strategy to tackle the multiscale deficits and vulnerabilities caused by peripheral expansion. The array of issues, including housing, environmental and mobility aspects, and quality of public space, calls for complex solutions that are network-based with a systemic approach.

Expanding the city to peripheral regions as a housing production strategy, while implementing infrastructural, technological, and ecological-environmental solutions such as those advocated in the Superblocks Program, despite the risk of this revitalized land appreciating following the ecological and environmental interventions, represents a legitimate effective planning solution, where environmental connection equates to quality of life in an expanding metropolitan region. This process leads cities to turn inward, in a quest to occupy voids and densify potential fabrics for a compact city. However, with buildable land scarce in Barcelona's consolidated area, new public policies for generating resources to reduce inequalities in peripheral areas are necessary.

The dynamics within an urban fabric constrained by its own morphology intensify environmental challenges linked to high construction density, the prioritization of automobiles, emissions, and other pollutants, as well as the inherent dryness of urban spaces caused by dense building patterns and lack of public areas for recreation and socializing. Hence, there is an imminent need for metropolitan planning to implement the network systems proposed.

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