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# The Barcelona Model reviewed

*from the beginning of  
democracy to now*

**This article about the Barcelona Model begins around the 1992 Olympic period and provides a context to compare Barcelona with other contemporary urban models. The initial aim is to give a general and critical overview.**

To begin with, it is necessary to introduce two fundamental ideas. The first is that the modernisation of Barcelona (and Spain in general) was significantly delayed during the decades of Franco's dictatorial regime. "Francoism" had the specific aim of weakening the Catalan metropolis. And the Olympic Games provided the opportunity and the impulse Barcelona needed to modernise and to make up for lost time and become a modern and well-equipped city.

The second is that the model of the city adopted during the Olympic Games period was very advanced in relation to the general political context. We must remember that the eighties were the years of the rise of a neo-liberal Right represented by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. And in the evolution of cities the trend was towards the neo-liberal city, promoted by the Chicago School of Economics and developed in United States territory

with the predominance of suburbanisation. And followed, for instance, in cities such as Santiago de Chile, Buenos Aires and São Paulo with the development of a “sprawling city” and gated neighbourhoods or gated communities, in other and more critical words, we are talking about merely gated urbanisations, not communities, not neighbourhoods.

Getting back to the Barcelona model it is important to draw attention to the unique geographical characteristics of Barcelona itself, so that we can better understand the city now and during its history. Seeing four of the main plans proposed for contemporary Barcelona –the Plan Cerdà (1859); the General Metropolitan Plan (1976); New Centrality Areas (1987) projected by the Joan Busquets municipal team, and the Second Renewal of Barcelona (1998)– it is evident that the shape of the city is a compact rectangle, almost a square, delineated by the line of the shore and the beginning of the Collserola Mountains, and by the rivers Besòs and Llobregat. It is important to make a geographical point here, because, administratively speaking, these two rivers fall slightly outside Barcelona town council limits.

In this sense, all urban interventions –like beaches, avenues such as la Diagonal and la Meridiana, ring-roads, bridges, tunnels and so on– must be understood in this general geometry of Barcelona and, especially, the strategic location of four Olympic areas, one in each corner of this square.

There are three main characteristics in the “Barcelona model”:

- Firstly, “the urban project versus the urban plan”. The urban project refers to design on an intermediate scale, to ensure the quality of architecture and public space and to improve the conventional urban planning at large following a technocratic pattern in order to define zoning and uses, standards and measures.
- Secondly, in this new and social city, the emphasis was put on public space as the urban linking device. The opening of the city to the sea front, with new kilometres of public beach, was of paramount importance, because, despite being a Mediterranean and coastal city, Barcelona had gradually lost contact with the sea, owing to the process of industrialisation that has been under way since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This tendency changed from the nineteen eighties.

And the last main characteristic is the agreement between the public administration and the private sector. Barcelona aimed to form a new alliance between the political power of the socialist administration, in the social democratic tradition, and private investments. If the two previous points came from the urban project, created by the architects, this third one was elaborated by Pasqual Maragall himself, mayor of Barcelona from 1982 to 1997. From his experience in Barcelona and his training in the United States (in the New School of Social Research in New York and in the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore), he began to look for ways in which both business and public funding could be used to regenerate the city into capitalism.

From a social perspective, the main objective of the Barcelona model was to achieve a balance, that is to say, an even distribution of facilities and installations to ensure a better quality of life for the city as a whole. The final objective was to reinforce the feeling that every individual was sharing urban life; the feeling that everyone was taking part in the new city.

It is possible to give an outline of seven points which formed the different bases for this development of Barcelona in the eighties, after the city was nominated for the 1992 Olympics in 1986.





The first point was the mechanisms of the renewal and integration of old, obsolete public spaces, and the creation of new urban parks. This was achieved by urban acupuncture, creating empty spaces (known as sponging) and pedestrianisation. Regarding the beaches, Barcelona has now 6 kilometres, more or less. In fact, Pasqual Maragall has declared: “Beaches are municipal social democracy”.

The second point is “Barcelona centralism versus Metropolitan territory”. The Olympic operation empowered Barcelona as a city, but the metropolitan area was excluded and enjoyed none of these improvements or benefits. The Olympic Barcelona reinforced the duality between urban centre and metropolitan periphery. Another thing is that the periphery of Barcelona did benefit from new facilities.

To understand this tension between Barcelona and its metropolitan region, we must remember the other big fight in contemporary Catalonia: the tension between Barcelona (until 2011 governed by the Left), and Catalonia, governed during the eighties by the regionalist Right represented by Jordi Pujol. For this reason, in 1987, just after the Olympic nomination of Barcelona in 1986 and the success of Pasqual Maragall’s management, Jordi Pujol decided to abolish the metropolitan government, CMB (Corporació Metropolitana de Barcelona). Why did he do this? To reduce the power of the Left in Barcelona area. This process had an obvious parallel with the conservative abolition of the GLC (Greater London Council) at the same time. And as a result of this fight between Catalan nationalism and social democracy, Barcelona city and Catalonia gained more power. However, the popular metropolitan area around Barcelona was effectively abandoned in

the Olympic period. It wasn’t until the nineties that this situation was reversed.

The third point is that the Olympic Games sped up the conversion of Barcelona into a huge service industry, while traditional industries, already in crisis since the seventies, were overlooked and the land they occupied was taken over

## The Olympic Barcelona reinforced the duality between urban centre and metropolitan periphery

by Olympic facilities and services industries, one of the most important of which was obviously the tourist sector. Between the late sixties and 1985, the city lost 42% of its manufacturing jobs. In 1990 almost 70% of jobs were in the service sector. This phenomenon created an attractive centre where people came to work and to consume, the so-called “terciarización”. At the same time, as a result of the Barcelona model having opted for density and concentration, the rich and the middle class remained clustered in the centre.

The fourth point is related with the new big urban complexes, structured as the 12 areas, called “Areas of new centrality” or “New downtown areas” distributed throughout the city, four of which were the Olympic areas. These hubs consist of main road intersections, old and abandoned infrastructures, like railway stations, and finally, large “no-man’s-land” spaces between neighbourhoods. In the sense of the Barcelona model, the Areas of new centrality are intended to redistribute levels of services and urbanism to the periphery of the city.

The fifth point deals with groupings of cultural installations and complexes whose aim was to improve and complete the cultural infrastructures on all levels to create a real cultural capital: for instance, museums, libraries and auditoriums. To this end, civic centres were also created in every neighbourhood.

The sixth point focuses on the treatment of Barcelona's architectural heritage. While some very representative buildings, like the former Olympic stadium and the old Palacio Nacional from the 1929 International Exhibition in Montjuïc, were renovated and restored, others, such as the industrial architecture in Poble Nou, were demolished to make way for new avenues and residential neighbourhoods. Two good examples of this were the construction of the Olympic Village on the site of what had previously been an industrial neighbourhood known as the "Catalan Manchester", and the difficulties to save the old industrial complex Can Ricart, also in Poble Nou, in 2005.

Finally, the seventh point is a new connectivity network around the city; a ring-road which revolutionised the city's traffic flow, attracting much of it to the city's periphery. It is necessary to point out that all these infrastructures were created to reinforce private car traffic.

To sum up, we can say, among other problems such as not building social housing, the two main flaws in the 1992 Barcelona Olympic city were:

- Firstly, the mistreatment of heritage stands out, especially the industrial heritage in Poble Nou. To understand this, one must understand that the underlying characteristic of the Spanish transition, from dictatorship to democracy, was forgetting: wiping out the past and ignoring the responsibility of Francoism in the Civil War and in contemporary Spain. This programmed "amnesia" was similarly applied to urbanism, with a *tabula rasa*, the aim being to erase the city's working class memory by demolishing popular and cooperative centres, old social housing and factories.
- And secondly, the total absence of any objectives of sustainability, paradoxically, in just the same year as the world was listening to the proposals from the Rio de Janeiro "Earth Summit" in 1992. In no building project –and here I'm talking about the Olympic Village, sports facilities or infrastructures– were any ecological criteria or sustainability standards implemented. It is true that the Olympic City in 1992 was the end of a process, and the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit, the same year, point out the beginning of a new epoch.

And if we talk about the main quality of Barcelona as an Olympic City it was that the entire city became the scenario of the Games, for the first time in history. In this sense, we can say that London, with its closed Olympic Park for the 2012 Games, did not learn from Barcelona.

As a conclusion, we can point out that cities are not static but in transformation, ever-changing, fluid; and in Barcelona's case, the collaboration between the public and the private has followed a tendency to favour the power and benefits of private interests, as opposed to public and administrative ones. Events such as the fiasco of the Forum in 2004 (the end of social agreement regarding the Barcelona model); the series of Strategic Plans put into practice from 1988 until now; or the Barcelona Trade Mark (Marca Barcelona) from 2000 with the introduction of the city into branding strategies, illustrate this ever increasing preponderance of private lobbies in the management of the city. The political change in municipal power that took place in 2011 makes very clear that the model is now already past. Now is the time to seek a new model for Barcelona, but following this way of privatisation will undeniably be very negative for the citizens||