

Urban enclosures in the Neoliberal city: the transformation of the Port Vell

*"I love this game,
I love this sport,
I love this league.*

Why don't I get my own team?"

Roman Abramovich. President of Chelsea F.C

Barcelona's waterfront regeneration as a contested space.

First of all, and before explaining the main characteristics of the project, I think it is important to situate a bit the context where it's located. We are talking here about the waterfront of Barcelona, as everywhere else, a very contested space object of desire of a private sector aware of the advantages of its stunning location, and an opportunity for the economic development and revitalization and reorganization of the city as a whole. In this sense, it's not the first time that the citizens of Barcelona see themselves threaten by an aggressive renovation project of its seafront following the interests and needs of the ruling classes of urban society. For example, in the city, it's well remembered the huge mobilization against an urban renewal project (Pla de la Ribera) during the Franco times that was perceived by the local movement as a speculative movement in favour of private real estate interests that want to transform the popular and industrial neighbourhoods in a "Mediterranean Copacabana". In the same direction, but in more recent years, and as a result of the commitment of the city by the tourism industry, there has been strong opposition movements towards some speculative processes linked to the construction of large hotels, the "illegal" proliferation of tourist apartments and its impact on the rising of prices of trade, services and the real estate market, the denunciate of cases of real estate mobbing (landlord harassment) and the conversion of Barceloneta, the maritim neighbourhood and the rest of neighbourhoods of the historic city on a theme park for tourists.

On the other hand, and as a key element in the transition of the city towards a service and tertiary economy, the "opening and recovery of the contact with the sea", has been crucial in the discourse of the ruling class. It can be said, that one of the most significant processes in the urban history of Barcelona, comparable to what was at the time the demolition of its walls, is the opening of the city to the sea. Although it's important to highlight the historical forgetfulness of large settlements of slums and thousands of people who inhabited the coastal Beach area, which were not considered therefore as "authentic barcelonenses" (Delgado, 2005), this project of opening and socialization of the sea and the "citizen recovery" of the beaches and the coastline it had high level of consensus and social acceptance.

However, in recent decades, when the city project has been sharpening its Neoliberal nature, they have been going a series of operations of urban development on the waterfront and especially in the front port, which have been a reverse process of privatization and commodification of this public space supposedly recovered for the city and by its citizens. Several projects situated mainly around the old harbour area, such as the Vela Hotel or the new project of transformation of Port Vell pose ending the principles that guided the development of a port "citizen" to become a new productive space dedicated to luxury tourism, defining a highly contested and problematic scenario, where the Waterfront of Barcelona is being object of a new speculative wave addressed to transform this privileged space of the city and defined the last intend of the public-private mixture and the urban elites to revive the real estate cycle.

Projects located in the most precious space, the boundary between the earth and the sea, which in previous decades had been offered to the citizens and now is offered to the luxury tourism destroying the democratic tone of its public space. Along with the opening of the Hotel Vela at the mouth of the port, this luxury marina has revived the traditional distrust toward the privatization of the seafront and its progressive recolonisation with skyscrapers and hotels.

The Marina Port Vell Project.

The project consist in the ampliation and transformation of the current public Marina, home of small and medium boats of 10 and 30 meters, in "the premiere Marina of the Mediterranean", home of super large luxury yachts, covering the demand that has Barcelona to become the "port base" for super Yatch in the mediterranean and it will strengthen the "nautical cluster" enhancing other activities, such as repair and maintenance of "mega-yachts". Notice. The plan book exclusive areas

for large yachts up to 170 meters length, that, traduce to the *"mine-is-bigger-than-yours"* world of mega-yachting, means huge, so there is only 13 yachts of more than 120 metres length on earth, one of them, the Eclipse of Roman Abramovich, according to there are certain voices, could be behind all this operation. The project aims to meet the potential demand (apparently not covered) for "megayatch parkings" of this wealthy elite; according to an economic report commissioned by the promoters: *"bouts are getting bigger, are getting flashier and they need a home, so we want to provide a proper home for them"*. Bellamy, Chief executive of Salamanca Investments Group. It's important to have in mind that there is only 3.064 vessels exceeding 24 metres length in the world. This is the select group to which the Marina seeks to attract. But the super rich demand security, five star luxury services and restricted or even no public acces, and the Marina Port Vell project is determined to provided all that.

To sum up, the project combines, the creation of a *resort*, that means, a walled, exclusive, privatized and 'high security area' to ensure the privacy of this wealthy people that do not want paparazzis arround (plus some luxury facilities and services for their crews, like a club launch or an spa), with and that's what make's this proposal so competitive- the combination of a unique location, a Marina in the middle, in the same heart of one of the most vibrant cities in the mediterrenan.

This project, that has to be considered just one step more in an ongoing speculative project in all the waterfront area, has experimented a huge social contestation, lead by the Plataforma defensem el Port Vell.

They oposed a project that supose the creation of a ghetto of billionaires, a walled, secured, and full of luxury services resort managed by a private company (a British Investment Fund) on the doorstep of some of the most popular districts of Barcelona, neigbourhoods, on the other hand, with high levels of unemployment, and some of the lowest levels of income in the city. Another element that generates irritation, is that, in a context of crisis, austerity and cuts, and near one of the most popular neighborhoods in Barcelona, they try to recreate a tourist infrastructure for a super-wealthy elite. As the urban anthropologist Teresa Caldera reminds us in many of his investigations, cities are becoming much more socially segregated, and thats because the most favored classes of the process of globalization are isolated from the rest of the city creating for themselves protected habitats: "spaces that are privatized, monitored and closed housing, consumption, leisure or work" (Caldeira, 2003:211). Bright archipelagos of utopian fancy utopian fancy dreamworlds of endless consumption, security, privacy and social exclusion.

But, the oposition is not only based in a class warfare rhetoric that demonizes the wealthy and business. One of the main critics is the physical and visual enclosure of the public domain land. Declaring a high security zone an building a fence to ensure the privacy of a the wealthy users means a privatization of some parts of the citizen Harbour that was opened to the city in the 1990s and promoting the disconnection of the urban fabric of Ciutat Vella with its seafront; and the creation of a visual barrier as a result of the new buildings, the size of the megaYachts (three floor houses) and the walled created for this "segregated" marina. In this sense, the project is consistent with the proliferation of "gated communities", special economic zones (ZES), Business Improvement District and the conversion of the city centers in merchandise in the era of tourist reproduction.

The Plataform defend in one hand, the citizen character of the urban harbour, a crucial urban space that is part of the historic city and a place to be enjoyed by thouse who live in the city , and on the other, the character of public domain of the watefront, something that belongs to everybody and the acces to have to be assure, as an element of the maritime culture, part of our historic and social heritage. But from the platform, we denounce not only this social model associated with this project but the environmental, social, economic and cultural impacts that it will provoke.

Trickle down effects vs rentier and gentrification.

The named "trickle-down economics" was the idea that by giving tax breaks to the wealthy and big business, this would spur economic growth that would benefit those further down the ladder. The same argument, (or excuse) is some how being used in this case, to defend this project. Spain is in a financial crisis. It needs jobs. It needs investments. This is providing that. The creation of wealth, and therefore jobs, operates as the main source of legitimiacion of this type of projects, defining the general will.

The idea is that:

- a) In a context of crisis we can't not only say no to huge investments but we have to take care of them (Trias: "in such difficult times, we cannot afford losing projects, we must support those who propose them and invest in the city"). We have to give them what they demand, and if the demand want the city center for a luxury privatizing busines, go on.
- b) The idea behind is always the same: "What is good for Barcelona is good for you". This investments, will trickle-down genereting benefits for everybody, providing wealth and employment for the surrounding neigbourhoods. According to calculations of the investment group, the new marina could create about 400 jobs and that the economic impact of the investment would be around the nearly 600 millions of euros.

The Plataforma has been criticizing this position with some interesting counterarguments.

(1st counter argument). Overestimating benefits and underestimating cost

As it has been studied in a numerous Large development projects of this kind, usually, the promoter underestimates the positive effects and underestimated the negative ones. When we read the socio-economic study delivered by the APB, the only source cited to justify the data is the Association of big yachts, a completely partial source of the sector itself. On the second hand, it give visibility only to the positive effects but does not evaluated (in economic terms) as possible harm to the existing productive activities (such as fishing) that can be impaired result of reform, nor the environmental costs or the costs for public administration and the city.

With respect to the jobs that supposedly will be generated on-board personnel, reality shows as both the temporary and permanent staff (able to grind more precarious) tend to be of foreign origin. Opponents doubt that economic impact, among other reasons, because those megayachts crews work under foreign flags of convenience, or the boats and people pay taxes in our country. Moreover, there are reasons to be skeptical, since it seems the same delinquent promised were made in the past with similar kind of operations (Hotel Vela).

2nd counter argument. The rentier and parasit nature of the operation

More than a industrial activity, which will create qualified employment (cluster) we are in front of a speculative operation and a rentier activity. The benefits here will come as a rent form, first of all from the moorings, and second of all through the management of this boats in the moments when they are not active. Note that one of 50 metres is being rented by something in between 300,000 and 400,000 euros per week. Benefits for the private operator, but few for the territory as a whole.

The process of reform and renovation responds only to the economic interests of private agents to manage and exploit the port infrastructure hoping to extract the maximum benefit from it, while the costs and impacts of the project are assumed by the community. In this sense, it is a process of privatization of resources, relationships and common territories. The port becomes a "vacuum of monopoly rents"; the life and the attractiveness of a city, considered as a collective product of its citizens, it is commercially capitalized by this business that extract this "monopoly rents" of this common good, privatizing the profitability of social benefits without contributing almost anything in return, mainly because the rentier nature of it's business.

This strong critique has forced the City Hall to come with the history of the nautical cluster to legitimize the project.

3rd counter argument. Spill-over effects or negative externalities?

The trickle down effects exist, but in another detection: generating negative externalities like gentrification¹. The plataforma denounced that behind all this lays a especulative operation that will not only generate wealth for the surrounding neighbourhoods but displacement and that this projects favoured segregated spaces generating "renewal Islands" in a sea of decay. That is the Barcelona's tale of two cities, one for the privileged money elite and one for locals.

In this sense, the neighbours see in the process of transformation of the port, a new chapter in the struggle that they maintain for years, against the market dynamics that favor an exclusive and excluding urban space and the processes of gentrification associated basically to the massive arrival of tourists, mainly the speculative processes linked to the construction of hotels, or the proliferation of ' tourist apartments.

Two example that give consistency to the fear of the population that the Marina end by increasing rents in Barceloneta and the displacement of traditional trade.

(a) as shown in the photo idea that Salamanca Investment this groups using to disseminate the project, luxury port is considered a first step in the disembarkation of speculative capital foreigners who have since targeted in all the waterfront and port of Barcelona. We see how, in the picture, the District of la Barceloneta has disappeared! and instead are a set of buildings of high standing.

¹ Some criticisms has come from groups directly affected, whether they are fishermen, who see how the plan affects part of the pier where they work today and that fear can be displaced, or amarristas, who have had to go out and search for mooring in other ports more away from the city (a few were neighbors who live directly in the port), by what we could defined as "Portification".

(b) on the other hand, the real estate market is advancing to the reform. As it has been published a few days ago on the magazine Spanish Real Estate Barceloneta is aspiring to become a residential zone of luxury with the transformation of port vell . As an example of the transformation a duplex penthouse with three bedrooms overlooking Port Vell is on the market, offered by more than 2 million euros. <http://www.realestatepress.es/MostrarNoticia.asp?M=0&Id=20929>

To sum up, the luxury Marina, far from the inclusive illusion that defends that will generate wealth and jobs, generate speculation, social exclusion, environmental degradation and represent a total looting of our common resources.

The Platform has done an important work criticizing the opacity of the port authority, as well as the lack of information and participation in the development and design of the project. The allegations presented by the entities have as the main argument the overall opacity of the process, not only by the lack of information and public participation mechanisms, but by the difficulties that the neighbors and members of the platform had to access to the public information. This lack of information, accountability and transparency in the explanation of the project to citizens, is at odds with the interest to "sell the project" future customer.

As a perfect example of this neoliberal urbanism, I will show you a video of the Councillor of urban planning acting as a pure commercial agent of the private enterprise Salamanca Investment and selling the project to the possible investors at the Monaco Yacht Show 2011. Before watching the video, I would like you to keep in mind that this project was still not even been approved by the consequent public administration and was still under discussion.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yunAUSRYtqs&feature=player_embedded (0,46- 2, 4)

One of the characteristic elements of the large urban projects in the current context of crisis and austerity, is that these are not based on a strong public investment in coalition with private oligarchies, as large infrastructural projects of the time of the real estate boom, but we directly face a situation where common resources and public goods, "are for sale" to private investors. Although the project seems that it has not cost a penny to the public administration, the reality is that we are facing a situation of expropriation of a common resource as it is the territory, and the selling and privatization of space public.

Platform “defend the Port Vell”

Born the may 2012 by citizens of la Barceloneta and other neighbourhoods, very soon become an important actor in the territorial discussions and in the process of waterfront renewal. This broad and cross-cutting opposition movement, surpassing NYMBY visions cutting from a particularist dimensions to a more broad defense of the common and the right to the city and the discussion of the city model.

Eventhough it could seem to be a classwar rhetoric, the mobilizations is not marked by a class component, being the Plataforma very plural in its ideological composition. The common of the (singular) struggles is precisely the defense of the territory, the maritimidad, the commons and the right to the city, which are the basis for the creation of the collective identity.

In this sense, the platform has been working on three levels of demands:

1. On the one hand, battling to withdraw the proposal to transform the Port Vell Marina luxury
2. On the other, the claim that the citizen port should be managed and control by the city Council and the residents and not by the port authority (APB) to deepen in the democratic governance of our city and retake control of our common property resources.

The question here is not so much about Spain or Catalunya sovereignty (even though we play with it: “el moll d’Espanya pels Catalans”).) but a strong criticism towards the neoliberal management made by the Autoritat Portuària and its unfair and unsustainable management of the citizen Port and the priority to the recovery of the city as a business. The port is a public domain that can not be privatized. Appealing to the sustainability and respect of the heritage and the use, access and the citizen's enjoy of the public spaces, the Plataforma base his claim of the right to the city through the affirmation of the common and a more democratic governance, appealing to the inalienable character of the public domain and the pursuit of the general interest through the exercise of its public role. In the same way, coastal marine and land has been considered (such as national parks or rivers) always a public property, a common resource, which belongs to us all and that should be managed in a sustainable manner against its possible overexploitation, recognized in the same Constitution (art.132).

3. Another of the lines, more proactive one, has been the propose, in an active collaboration with people from the University, political parties and technicians and experts, a space of reflection from which imagine a new proposal

of regeneration for the waterfront and port of Barcelona looking for new ways of relating knowledge and mobilization. In this scenario, it has been defined a kind of counter-planning from below, as well as an starting network for the defense and promotion of the maritimidad of Barcelona. The most important victory of the plataforma, even though the project has been finally approved, has been to open the citizen debate about the reform of the port, and the waterfront of the city. Citizen mobilization has revealed the lack of transparency that exists around the project of reform, which had been carefully away from the public opinion. The introduction of new themes in the public agenda, questioning the type of territorial development of the country and the process of waterfront regeneration and elaborating new proposals in the framework of an alternative territorial model. We can also say that, thanks to the citizen protest, some changes have been introduced in the project, such as the elimination of the platform on the sea with the 5 star luxury restaurant or the reduction of the dimensions of the security fence.