Urban Planning in a Mediterranean Port City: The contested nature of urban redevelopment in the *el Raval* neighborhood in Barcelona

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1. Introduction

Despite the limitations of transferring "successful urban policies" from one city to another (González, 2011), in the last decades, Barcelona has recurrently captured the interest of urban scholars and practitioners who, over time, have looked at urban renewal programs in the city as policy models to follow (Marshall, 2004, Monclús, 2003, Mueller, et. al. 2020). Among these programs, one of the redeveloped areas that has caught the most interest is its downtown.

Near to the waterfront, Barcelona's downtown area, like other Mediterranean port cities which have retained historical neighborhoods, has undergone a long and convoluted evolution. In this sense, the transformation of the neighborhood which this chapter focusses, el Raval, symbolizes Barcelona's attempts to preserve the character of the old city while simultaneously embarking on programs for urban renewal, and economic and social upgrading.

Prior to the major urban renewal projects initiated in the 1980s, el Raval was one of the poorest areas in the city beset with urban, economic, and social problems. Taking this period as a crucial turning point, the central part of the chapter focuses on the evolution of this quarter's urban morphology and social-economic dynamics under the various urban redevelopment plans that the local government embarked on from the early 1980s to the late 1990s. To place this analysis in context, first we take into consideration the origins of the quarter, from its creation when the second set of Barcelona's medieval walls was built in the fourteenth century and its evolution until the ending of the Franco period in the 1970s. We then address the policies, planning tools and agents involve in the renewal programs of the 1980s and 1990s. Central to this is our analysis of the interaction among the political, economic, and social agents involved in the redevelopment process, as well as the planning policies that were implemented. We conclude with final remarks on the seeming contradictions engendered by the chosen redevelopment strategies, which has resulted on the one hand in increasing tourism and middle-class young Western residents, and on the other the large-scale settlement of African and Asian working-class immigrants into the neighborhood. The analysis applies a combination of primary and secondary sources, including extensive notes from field work and interviews with key stakeholders, and the analysis of historical and planning documents, statistical data, newspapers news and academic literature.

2. Original urban growth and evolution

El Raval neighborhood, which in Catalan means outskirts, was created in 1371 when Barcelona's local authorities built a second set of medieval walls. The walls were completed just as the city's medieval economic and demographic growth started to decline. As a result, Barcelona did not expand at the predicted rate, and for the next few centuries the area remained

mainly farming land. Eventually, the availability of land protected by walls attracted institutions of the Catholic Church, particularly monasteries (Hughes,1993). From an urban perspective, the area did not fully develop until the nineteenth century and at that time was still identified on contemporary maps as "the new city" (*la ciutat nova-ville neuve*) (figure 1).

Figure 1. Barcelona surrounded by walls in the 17th century with the old town (left of the map) and new town (right)

Source: "Fons del Centre Excursionista de Catalunya (CEC) dipositat a l'ICGC".Fons cartogràfic del Centre Excursionista de Catalunya, https://cartotecadigital.icgc.cat. Creative Commoms License.

Until the industrial revolution, Catholic Church related buildings remained the most important built structures in the area. However, from the 1770s, large-scale urbanization paralleled the industrialization process in Barcelona to the extent that by early 1840s, el Raval was the most industrialized neighborhood of the city (Casellas, 2003). In a period in which workers lived close to their factories due to the lack of accessible public transportation, population density in the quarter grew quickly. By the mid-1850s, el Raval had become one of the most densely populated neighborhoods in Europe. While in the 1700s the quarter had only 16 per cent of the city's population, by 1832 it had reached 33.7 per cent, and by 1859 it housed 41 per cent of the total inhabitants of Barcelona (Martínez-Rigol, 2000). To reduce the very high

population and industrial densities, in 1846 local authorities approved a law that prohibited the location of new industries in the quarter. This law, together with increasing labor conflicts encouraged industrialists to relocate outside the city. Small factories and craftsman's workshops remained, while housing, hostels, taverns, and restaurants progressively occupied the vacant buildings and land left by the relocating factories (Artigues, Mas and Suñol, 1980).

An important turning point in the development of both the city and the neighborhood, was the approval of the Cerda Plan of 1859. This allowed the connection and expansion of Barcelona with its hinterland, with a new urban layout that radically transformed the city's morphology. (Corominas Ayala, 2021; Magrinyà, 2009; Pallares-Barbera, Badia and Duch, 2011). In the following decades, despite the out-migration of large industrial firms from el Raval, between 1887 and 1930 the population density increased, driven in part by the jobs created by the public works programs associated with Barcelona's World Fairs of 1888 and 1929 (Casellas, 2009). In a pattern that would be replicated again from the 1980s, to accommodate the influx of workers migrants and boost income, residents rented part of their small apartments to the newcomers, encouraging a dramatic increase of the population and density in the area (Villar, 1996).

Spanish neutrality during the First World War was a boon for local industry as they became suppliers to the warring European countries (Romero Salvadó, 2019). In parallel, there was a rapid increase and expansion of illegal activities such as smuggling, prostitution, gambling, and drug consumption, which concentrated in downtown. El Raval became the center of these illegal activities, influencing both the character and perceptions of the neighborhood. In 1925 in a series of articles on el Raval, the journalist Francisco Madrid named the southern part of the quarter `El Barrio Chino´ (*Chinatown*) (Donovan, 2016; Fabre and Huertas, 2000). The name became immediately popular and in the early 1930s artists and writers such as Jean Genet contributed to the expansion of the Barrio Chino mythology as an area rife in illegal activities (Villar, 996).

Before the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), the population of el Raval remained predominantly working class, mainly making a living as craftsmen or workers and/or owners of small stores. This was supplemented by the many direct and indirect jobs provided by the nightlife of the quarter (Martínez-Rigol, 2000). Furthermore, during Franco's regime (1939-1975) Barcelona's urban fabric underwent a general process of degradation (Busquets, 2005; Casellas, 2009). After the end of the Civil War, Spain and Barcelona suffered from a deep economic crisis precipitated in part by the Franco's autarkic policies (Preston, 1994). When the economy started to improve in the late 1950s, Barcelona underwent the fastest demographic growth in its history. Like the immigration flows of the early twentieth century, el Raval was again the gateway neighborhood for many newcomers who were often accommodated by families renting out part of their small apartments or lived in the many cheap hotels in the area. Over time, those that improved their economic situations moved out of the area, with the less successful ones remaining in the quarter. Nevertheless, despite many

urban and social problems as well as the negative image attached to the "El Barrio Chino" mythology, during the 1950s and 1960s, the neighborhood was still able to retain small shops, restaurants, and workshops which provided some degree of economic and social identity to the area (Villar, 1996).

3. The social, economic, and planning struggles in the post-Franco period

In the mid-1970s a series of political, economic, and social changes deeply affected el Raval's social and economic life. First, unemployment increased due to the harsh economic crisis that reached Spain in 1973 (Lieberman, 2005). Second, after the death of Franco in 1975, the neighborhood experienced the political and social changes linked to the transition from dictatorship to democracy. Taking advantage of the repeal of many of Franco's laws, the brothels that were closed during the late Franco period reopened while drug dealing, and drug use (especially of heroin) expanded. Third, over-crowding and poverty increased as el Raval attracted a disproportionate share of mostly poor newly arriving immigrants from the Magreb and sub-Sahara African countries (Fabre and Huertas, 2000).

The existence of drug consumption and trafficking was not a new experience for the neighborhood. Since the First World War the quarter had provided morphine and especially cocaine to the city. In the mid-1960s, the drug market in the quarter became specialized in marijuana and hashish, with many of the local bars becoming involved in drug trafficking. This led to a law approved by the Franco administration that ordered the closure of numerous bars during 1972 and 1973 (Carandel, 1978). Despite the increasing legal and police pressure, the drug market in el Raval survived and by the mid-1970s had increasingly become specialized in the supply of heroin. The growth of heroin consumption and dependency had extremely negative consequences for the nature of the neigborhood as many of young residents from working class-families became addicted to drugs or were caught up in the drug trade. The deterioration of the social fabric was so intense that by the mid-1980s, Barcelona´s downtown in general, and el Raval in particular, had become a dangerous place to live. International drug clans competed to control specific areas. In 1982, it was estimated that 60 per cent of all robberies in downtown were linked to drug consumption (Fabre and Huertas, 2000).

Apart from social and economic factors, the progressive physical degradation of downtown and especially el Raval was also the result of urban planning regulations caused by successive redevelopment plans for the quarter (Porfido, Perez, and Pesoa, 2019). Since Cerdà´s original 1859 plan, eight other plans[i] had been approved by the city that all referred to the need to decrease population density and to rationalize the built environment through the creation of new avenues and streets that would provide open space and facilitate vehicle circulation. Although the projects were never implemented as planned and el Raval remained unchanged, these plans contributed to urban disinvestment since for many decades the owners of affected buildings stopped investing in their real estate.

Public policies on renting also contributed negatively to building maintenance (Sendra Ferrer, 2022). To stop the escalation in rents that occurred after the First World War, in 1920 a Royal decree froze all urban rents in Spain. Franco's regime maintained this rent freeze until 1956, when a new urban rental law was passed that allowed moderate annual increases. Nevertheless, in 1964 a new law introduced the possibility of extending leases for up to three family generations. Given these strict rent control laws, together with periodic bouts of high inflation, landowners had little incentive to invest in the upkeep of their buildings. Tenants, who did not own the buildings and constrained by limited economic resources, likewise had little incentive to do even basic maintenance on their buildings or apartments (Casellas, 2003). The result of this policy was the deterioration of the quality of the rental housing stock in the city in general, but in el Raval in particular.

Economic indicators also provide evidence of the decline of the local job-market. In 1986 the official unemployment rate for Ciutat Vella was 30 per cent. The real unemployment rate was probably much higher considering the high percentage of undocumented workers who lived in the area. Further, more than 60 per cent of the documented labor force were unskilled workers (Comellas, 1995). In addition, there was the continuing problem of very high population density. In 1981 downtown Barcelona had 118,409 registered residents and an average density of almost 300 inhabitants per hectare (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2014). In some areas density was 1,100 inhabitants per hectare (Comellas, 1995). It is against this reality of urban deterioration, that by early 1980s the City Council saw neighborhood rehabilitation and downtown renewal as both a political and social priority.

Between 1981 and 1986 el Raval lost 14.5 per cent of its registered population, reducing population in the area to around 40,000 people. By way of comparison, in the same period, the population of Barcelona declined by just 3.7 per cent. Simultaneously, the neighborhood was changing as native-born population moved out and was replaced with immigrants with fewer resources. Downtown also had the highest increase of elderly people living alone in Barcelona. By 1986, 27.6 per cent of people older than 65 years old lived alone in the neighborhood, compared to 19.2 per cent for the rest of the city (Casellas, 2003). In 1991 a Barcelona City Council study that examined the housing characteristics of el Raval found that 18.1 per cent of housing had no bathtub, up to 45.4 per cent lacked hot water and 11.6 per cent had no running water. While in Barcelona as a whole, 61.5 per cent of apartments were owned by the residents, in el Raval only 29.4 per cent of residents owned their apartments (Ràfols, 1997).

Assessing the problems of downtown, local urban planners recommended that the urban reforms in the neighborhood should focus on: 1) demolition of the most deteriorated areas; 2) recovery of public land to build neighborhood facilities and services; 3) rehabilitation of the housing stock; and 4) conservation of the existing urban, architectural, and social structure of the neighborhood (Artigues, Mas and Suñol; 1980). In the following decades, the rehabilitation strategy implemented by the City Council would prove to have mixed success

in achieving these goals. The policies that guided the process are addressed in the following sections.

4. Actors and policy dynamics of downtown redevelopment

Due to the acute urban and social problems of downtown in the early 1980s, local officials considered that a successful urban redevelopment program required a comprehensive redevelopment strategy and a significant amount of investment to support it. This was achieved through three steps. First, the approval of new urban redevelopment plans; second, attaining consensus among institutions regarding priorities and the provision of sufficient financial resources; and third, the establishment of special agencies to implement the plans (Casellas, 2003).

Under the direction of the architect Oriol Bohigas, the chief urban planner of the City Council, the approach for downtown redevelopment was based on the concept of re-equilibrium between the physical and social structure of the neighborhoods. In Bohigas' opinion, this urban philosophy considered that the main problem of downtown was not high population density *per se* but high land-use density and the lack of basic public services and open space. Following this rationale, Bohigas proposed the need for opening areas through selective rather than large-scale demolitions, the provision of adequate neighborhood services, and the creation of well-designed open spaces (Bohigas, 1985 and 1999).

Following a mandate from the City Council, a team of architects and economists wrote a renewal plan (PERI Plan). This top-down plan evolved from a previous study, "*From the Opera House to the Seminary*" (1981), which highlighted the importance of capitalizing on the rehabilitation of the existing cultural and architectonic assets of the neighborhood. As per the recommendations of this plan, the first urban intervention was to be the transformation of two buildings owned by the Catholic Church, one dating from the fourteenth century and another from the sixteenth century, into cultural centers. The PERI plan also recommended the rehabilitation of a hospital complex constructed in the early fifteen century into cultural and community centers. Reinforcing the strategy of capitalizing on cultural assets (Jauhiainen1992), the rehabilitation plan approved by the City Council in 1983 aimed to expand the cultural assets of the neighborhood by constructing a large new museum of contemporary art (MACBA - Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona) that would be the center piece of a newly created central square (figure 2). The MACBA building was designed by the American architect, Richard Meier in 1990 and built between 1991 and 1995.

Figure 2 – MACBA Museum in Raval North

Source: Grant Saff July 2015

To further guarantee a comprehensive approach to downtown redevelopment, the council created additional policy instruments by approving an Integral Actuation Plan (PAI). The PAI included policy guidelines for five aspects of the redevelopment process: urbanism, social welfare, economic development, social development, and image improvement (von Heeren, 2002). The successful implementation of the plans needed large-scale public financial investment and the coordination of public agencies and institutions (Interview Planner, 2000). To achieve that goal the City Council attempted to attain consensus among local, regional, and national public institutions regarding the aims and strategies for urban redevelopment of el Raval.

4.1.The Institutional consensus building

The first step in building an institutional consensus to guide the redevelopment process was to declare the downtown a Rehabilitation Integral Area (ARI). The ARI was a new policy concept created by the Spanish government in the early 1980s to provide special financial support and coordinate public efforts to help redevelop distressed urban areas (Cabrera, 1999). Under the new democratic government, Madrid began to decentralize and delegate governmental responsibilities to the regional level, which meant, the City Council required the approval of the Catalan government to create the ARI. In 1985 the City Council presented documentation to the Catalan government that containing the urban reforms established by the downtown plans. The Catalan government, controlled by a conservative Catalan nationalist party took a year to grant the special status, while disagreements between the Socialist controlled City Council and the conservative Catalan government further delayed the constitution of the ARI's managing commission until 1987 (Martínez-Rigol, 2000; Comellas, 1995). In 1987, Joan Clos (who became Mayor of Barcelona in 1997), was appointed head of the Executive Commission of the downtown district. Using a technocratic

approach, Clos become instrumental in implementing urban reforms in downtown Barcelona (Casellas, 2003).

The ARI Executive Commission consisted of representatives from the Catalan government, the City Council, the Barcelona Chamber of Commerce, and the various neighborhood associations. The main objective of the Commission was to coordinate the redevelopment efforts of all public agencies that had powers over urban planning and zoning, social welfare and facilities, economic promotion, infrastructure, and the promotion of private rehabilitation and citizens' security (Sindicatura, 1995). The inclusion of neighborhood and business associations in the ARI Commission helped to publicly portray an image of consensus in the renewal process. The highly technical purpose of the commission, however, questions the actual role assigned to the community groups represented by the presidents of downtown's community-based organizations. ARI's officials emphasized that community participation was crucial in ensuring the relocation of displaced families within the neighborhood and the preservation of the urban social structure (Cabrera, 1999). Affected residents and grassroots movements opposing the urban renewal disagree to what extent this occurred (Arbaci and Tapada-Berteli, 2012).

Raval's PERI plan selected seven sub-areas for redevelopment. Under the ARI, these areas were redefined into two project-sectors: Raval North and Raval South, which displayed different urban characteristics (figure 3).

Figure 3. El Raval within downtown and Cerda's urban morphology

Source: Adaped from Institut Cartogràfic i Geològic de Catalunya, Creative Commoms License. https://cartotecadigital.icgc.cat.

Raval North possessed a considerable number of historical and cultural buildings, while Raval South was the center of the old “El Barrio Chino” with the highest number of deteriorating housing and greater unemployment and social problems, contained a higher level of legal and illegal immigrants and had a more negative image as a site of wide-spread criminality than Raval North (Pareja and Tapada, 2000). The basic urban operation of the Raval South project was articulated around the Raval Central Plan (PCR) which called for the construction of a central North-South pedestrian corridor crossing the inner center of the quarter and the building of new housing units and public facilities in the surrounding area.

4.2.The Public-private partnership strategy

In 1988 the City Council created the public-private partnership Ciutat Vella Promotion Inc. (PROCIVESA) with the Council and Barcelona's county government constituting the public sector participants and several local banks and neighborhood businesses accounting for private sector participation. When created in 1988, public funding represented 60.7 per cent of the total available capital (2,800 million pesetas, or 16.8 million Euros at the official 1999 conversion rate); 53.6 per cent from the City Council and 7.1 per cent from the Catalan Government (Raventós, 2000), with the remaining 39.3 per cent of capital coming from the private sector. Over-time private sector capital in the agency would increase to 49 per cent of the total.

PROCIVESA’s mandate combined administrative tasks such as expropriation of property with operational tasks such as the execution of housing projects. The partnership was contracted to last 14 years. Operationally, PROCIVESA specialized in the management of land for any public or private use and the renovation of existing housing, while the construction of new housing to accommodate the displaced population was the responsibility of the Catalan Land Institute (INCASOL) and of the public housing department, their counterpart agency of the City Council (Raventós, 2000; Gallén-Díaz, 2001). In 2002, PROCIVESA was dissolved, and its assets and projects transferred to the City Council, which created a new public-private agency, Ciutat Vella Foment Inc. (FOCIVESA), with the goal of finishing planned projects and implementing new urban reforms.

The City Council searched for new formulas to involve private investment in the rehabilitation of downtown housing stock. In 1990 an agreement among the central government’s Ministry of Public Works, the Catalan Government and the City Council created the Ciutat Vella District Rehabilitation Office (ORCV). The objective of this Office was to provide bureaucratic support, facilitate financing at the lowest interest rate, and give technical advice to families and corporations that were rehabilitating individual downtown apartments or housing blocks. In 1994 the Office expanded its services with the designation

of special redevelopment areas in el Raval in which private investors rehabilitating housing could benefit from a public subsidy of up to 30 per cent of the total investment (Martínez-Rigol, 2000).

4.3. The Limited and conflicted nature of community participation in the planning process

Though Barcelona has the image of a city in which community participation has been integral to urban policy, planning and implementation, even in el Raval neigborhood (Battagli and Trem, 2011), a deeper analysis of the dynamics of decision-making in the 1980s and 1990s reveals the need for questioning this narrative. In the case of el Raval, the inclusion of the President of the Neighborhood Association into the Commission seemed to guarantee the participation of community-based organizations in the downtown redevelopment process. The key questions are how influential this organization and other grassroots movements were in shaping the redevelopment process and how representative the leadership was of the communities they served? The PERI plan for el Raval emphasized the need for community participation but did not give clear examples of how to incorporate this into the process. Furthermore, the Commission's role was largely confined to technical activities, and it is unclear about the actual contribution that the grassroots representatives contributed to the planning process.

There has subsequently been criticism of the ineffectiveness of neighborhood association in defending the interests of the residents affected by the urban renewal programs (Alexandre, 2000; Capel, 2005; Degen and García, 2012; Fernández, 2012; Mendoza-Arroyo and Vall-Casas, 2014). In el Raval, much of this critique centered on the institutionalized character of the association and its financial dependency on the City Council. Questions were also raised about the actual agenda of the Neighborhood Association (Interviews with grassroots downtown movements, 2000 and 2001). After the first local elections held in 1979, the elected city council initiated a process of decentralization by creating ten planning districts and encouraging citizens' involvement in public affairs (Borja, 1996). Within this framework, the Council started to provide financial resources to the neighborhood community-based organizations with the goal of encouraging their development. Huertas and Andreu (1996), who have extensively studied and documented grassroots movements in Barcelona, argue that, although the financial dependency of the associations on the Council and the lack of a separate financing law did not automatically compromise the effectiveness of neighborhood-based community organizations, it does bring the degree of their true independence into question.

In 1995 a group of residents and businesses unhappy with the role played by the institutionalized neighborhood association created an alternative grassroots organization, the Raval Table. During the late 1990s, the Raval Table was active in defending the interest of residents against renewal policies. Among its activities, the Raval Table played a key role in

informing residents about renewal plans, organizing demonstrations and litigating against urban projects put forth by PROCIVESA (Alexandre, 2003). This generated confrontations with the established community-based organization, fragmenting participation efforts in the neighborhood and increasing distrust among residents.

5. The Contested Urban Transformation

Refined from the goals of the PERI Plan, the Raval Central Plan (PCR) was created for the redevelopment of Raval South. The implementation of the PCR, subsidized by the EU Cohesion Fund, saw the expropriation and demolition of 1,384 apartment units and 293 business spaces, which in el Raval represented the disappearance of 127 apartment blocks. The expropriated space was transformed into 41,030 square meters of land deployed for new pedestrian spaces and parks, roads to increase the circulation of cars and bicycles and for new public housing. According to the City Council the objectives of the redevelopment were: 1) reducing urban density by creating new open space; 2) improvement of pedestrian, bicycle and car mobility within the quarter; 3) the elimination of physical and visual barriers, with the opening a pedestrian corridor in the heart of the quarter; 4) the reduction of urban traffic congestion; 5) the improvement of public transportation networks; 6) the renovation of water, electric and gas infrastructure; 7) the rehabilitation of the housing blocks surrounding the new open space; and 8) the improvement of quality of life for local residents (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2000).

Supported by EU Cohesion Funds, which financed 85 per cent or 24.6 million Euros of its total cost, the renewal was divided into four plans: North Opening, South Opening, Central Opening and Robadors Block. The budgeted project was slated for the period December 1994 to December 1995, but delays meant that two extensions were approved in December 1996 and December 1999. The North Opening affected 15 apartment blocks, which included the demolition of 185 apartments. The demolition provided 4,409 square meters of additional space that allowed for the creation of a new street 15 meters wide. The South Opening involved the completion of urban reforms initiated in the early 1990s. By the time the City Council received funding from the Cohesion Fund, PROCIVESA had already displaced the tenants and demolished the housing. Funding was required for streets and squares as well as for infrastructure improvements. Within the recovered land, the Catalan government built 112 new public housing apartments.

Figure 4 - El Raval Boulevard

Source: Grant Saff, January 2016

The largest of the renewal projects in the area was the Central Opening: El Raval Boulevard. The plan, initiated before gaining the financial support of the EU, affected 62 buildings that contained 657 apartments and 140 businesses. The EU Cohesion Funds were used to pay for the acquisition of 48 buildings, which included 585 apartments and 72 businesses, demolition of the 62 buildings and construction of the new open space. The El Raval Boulevard design includes a central pedestrian corridor that is 32 meters wide by 215 meters long (figure 4), a two-lane road on each side of the central corridor with two traffic circles for cars at each end, and sidewalks parallel to the road that range from 5.5 to 6.7 meters wide. The facades of the buildings facing the boulevard were also renovated (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 1999 and 2001).

6. Final remarks

From a perspective of almost four decades since the urban redevelopment of downtown was initiated in the 1980s, the success of the projects remains open to interpretation. By the late 1990s, the presence of new cultural facilities and an upgraded infrastructure were successful in attracting tourists and middle-income residents to the neighborhood, but they were already creating gentrification (Delgado, 2008; Domínguez and Scarnato,2017; Sánchez-Aguilera and González-Pérez, 2021; Rius et al, 2015). Additionally, growing international migration into Spain, and Barcelona in particular, generated a new social structure in the el Raval, with a mixture of old traditional low-income residents, some local young professionals, and poor individuals and families that have arrived from Asia and Africa. This last trend created a mixture of gentrifying tourist facilities next to shops and services oriented to the new immigrant residents (Sargatal, 2001). By 2014, with a population of 48,471 inhabitants, 47.9 per cent of the quarter’s residents were foreigners, with the most prevalent groups being from Pakistan, the Philippines and Morocco. They represented a substantially higher foreign-born

percentage than the 16.3 per cent that prevailed for the city as a whole (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2016).

New services provided by the public sector, diminished urban decay, and more prevalent green spaces were positive outcomes resulting from the renewal projects. These urban upgrades improved the wellbeing of traditional residents and provided additional services for the growing number of poor foreigners moving into the neighborhood. Nevertheless, despite the attempts to lower density, by 2013 el Raval still had a much higher population density (44,145 people per square kilometer) than the city as a whole (15,793), and its residents were significantly poorer than the city's average family income, which was only 60.3 percent of the mean average income for Barcelona as a whole (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2016).

The presence of low-income natives, and newly arrived poor immigrants generated an amalgam of different social and cultural needs as well as contradictory economic and cultural dynamics (Fernández, 2012). Public housing tenants complained about the noise and conflictive character of public space (López, 2010), as well as of substandard housing, and visible prostitution and drug trafficking in the south part of el Raval (Angulo, 2011). Additionally, grassroots associations continued to denounce real estate speculation, linked to tourism promotion (Boneta, 2004; Coordinadora contra la especulació del Raval, 2008). By the turn of the century, gentrification was fueled as Western European and North American students and young professionals started to move into the area (Sargatal, 2001). Among the reasons of this were lifestyle opportunities, rather than work, and the presence of similar other transnational mobile migrants concentrated in centrally located downtown enclaves (Cocola-Gant and Lopez-Gay, 2020).

To conclude, we could argue that the downtown Barcelona remains a contested space resulting from several different processes. The morphological and social structure of el Raval has changed dramatically since the renewal process started in the 1980s. On one hand, there has been a significant urban upgrading: the cultural strategy – museums, restored buildings with architectonic value; and tourist related facilities – upscale hotels, restaurants, bars, and shops. In parallel, el Raval has become a tourist destination, with thousands of visitors walking its narrow and twisted streets to explore some the most emblematic tourist destinations of Barcelona. Western young students and professionals complement the demand for upscale services and products. On the other hand, there was an unplanned growing presence of poor newcomers and the eventually the establishment of businesses and social networks to address the consumption patterns and cultural needs of these new documented and undocumented immigrants into the neighborhood. This dichotomy helped to slow the gentrification process initiated in the late 1980s, while simultaneously avoiding the "ghettoization" of the neighborhood resulting from the concentration of immigrants with limited economic resources. This, of course, does not imply that the contradictions and tensions of the neighborhood are over, but rather that the area currently exists within dynamic unstable equilibriums created by planned redevelopments, property speculation, rapid

immigration, and an uncertain global and local economy. Myth, daily life, and urban politics in el Raval thus continue unfolding in a creative conflict, becoming a microcosm of Barcelona´s current and future opportunities, constraints and challenges.

List of Acronyms

ARI - Rehabilitation Integral Area (Àrea de Rehabilitació Integral)
EU - European Union
FOCIVESA - Ciutat Vella Foment Inc. (Foment de Ciutat Vella S.A.)
INCASOL - Catalan Land Institute (Institut Català del Sòl)
MACBA – Barcelona´s Art Contemporary Museum (Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona)
ORCV - Ciutat Vella District Rehabilitation Office (Oficina de Rehabilitació de Ciutat Vella)
PAI - Actuation Plan (El Pla d'Actuació Integral)
PCR – Raval Central Plan (Plan Central del Raval)
PERI Plan - Special Plan of Interior Reform (Pla Especial de Reforma Interior)
PROCIVESA – Ciutat Vella Promotion Inc (Promoció Ciutat Vella S.A.)

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