# The power of neighbourhoods. Bottom-up governance and urban planning in a working class district of Barcelona, Nou Barris

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**Abstract:** It has been shown that the spaces most threatened by the COVID-19 health crisis were cities, due to their high population density and levels of labour or tourist mobility. However, they are also the places with the highest human, material and social capital and from where cures and alternatives can arise (Nel·lo, 2020). The most hopeful scenarios are based on community organisation and on the accumulation of many successful historical experiences (Observatorio Metropolitano de Madrid, Diez and Col·lectiu Víric, 2015). This case study of the city of Barcelona conducts a review of: 1) the theoretical aspects referring to democratic radicalism, 2) governance and the government system, and 3) its applicability to urban planning and then 4) it describes how the case study is applied to the neighbourhood scale in Barcelona and specifically 5) the neighbourhood movement of the district of Nou Barris.

Keywords: democratic radicalism, citizen empowerment, participative governance, civic action

## 1. The theories of democratic radicalism

The environmental, social and COVID-19 health crises have given rise to challenges that are difficult to solve. The most individualist alternatives are always at our disposal (Pigem, 1994), while state-oriented organisation shows weaknesses in terms of authoritarian, corrupt, productivist and arms biases in state capitalism systems (Amin, 1974). Somewhere in between, community self-organisation promotes democratic radicalism and governance, with the best results shown through proximity. In this respect, Murray Bookchin (1991) maintains that separation and self-reliance, such as that prevailing in eco villages, go against the principles of social organisation and political counterpower that a transforming structure should assume. This author's thesis of libertarian municipalism proposes a movement linked to society, without becoming isolated from the institutional system or renouncing elections. This implies breaking away from the predominant formalist and liberal view of democracy in which participation is only present in the election of representatives and not in decision-making or ensuring the redistribution of wealth and power (Aguiló, 2014). Real democracy would require accepting *demodiversity* (Santos & Avritzer, 2003), assuming the coexistence of different democratic models and practices and searching for alternative means other than the usual democratic channels of liberal politics. It requires unlearning and transforming, fighting against the *monoculture* of this globalised liberal democracy and single discourse with projects

and campaigns that generate practices of articulation and complementarity between participative, radical and representative democracy (Aguiló, 2013).

Citizen empowerment would be based on the concept of *prefigurative* politics with ways of organisation and tactics that anticipate the structure of the desired society, "… those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal" creating more radical and participative political practices (Boggs, 1977) and generating ways of popular self-governance able to assume the power that is currently in the hands of privileged minorities. Within this context, the new political forms are conceived in spaces of broader and higher quality participation, where the public domain constitutes an element of social change and the capacity of State intervention is widened to politicise an economy oriented towards the common good and transparency.

In recent years, we have seen how the democratic imagination, through the social movements of the *indignados* and the anti-austerity movement of 2011 in Spain, may be deployed in practices that go beyond conventional actions. Political, social or cultural transformation can be reinforced by actions in at least three social dimensions: 1) grassroots and assembly movements; 2) the neighbourhood and association fabric, together with NGOs; and 3) the academic world (Col·lectiu Víric, 2015). Their contribution, going beyond the personal commitment, adopts teamwork practices, for which there are many recommendations derived from direct experience (Cembranos & Medina, 2003). The establishment of alternative mechanisms of economic organisation have added to the defence of the rights of social citizenship, the reduction of vulnerability and dependence on market mechanisms (García & Pradel, 2019). Therefore, the vindications beginning with the denouncement of capitalist privatisation have evolved into the development of self-management models of amenities, neighbourhood assembly networks, community food supply experiences, popular culture, etc., which are starting to resemble governance systems.

## 2. Governance and the government system

Although the concept of governance can be considered to be as old as human civilisation, it became a widely used concept from the 1990s. Despite its complex and sometimes polysemic nature, according to many authors, in governance it is possible to identify a social form in which the formal government, civil society and business fabric interact to manage public affairs in a different way.

This form of acting is due to the acknowledgement of the existence of a crisis, of certain social transformations and the exhaustion of the organisational principles of social life in general and of the government in particular (García,

2015). It is no coincidence that the practical application of governance has come about precisely as a consequence of the crisis of the Fordist model of regulation (Méndez, 2018) and of the welfare state in the 1980s, that had begun in the 1970s. The crisis was used for industrial delocalisation and the restructuring of European urban areas, with the emergence of new neoliberal entrepreneurial forms of local regulation that imply structural changes in urban management (Pradel, 2007).

To do this, it is initially necessary to acknowledge, accept and integrate conflict management as an intrinsic element of the political process, so as to subsequently create a government system through the participation of different actors within the framework of plural networks and establish a new position for the public powers in the government processes. In addition, new functions and the use of new management instruments are adopted (Blanco & Gomá, 2006). In this way, the government becomes an agent of governance, shaping social spaces in which the rest of the actors interact, normalising the creation of public-private relational structures to direct policies, projects and the management of democratic institutions (Somoza, 2013). The undertaking of this function by the government suggests that from its origin in the American neoliberal schools of thought, the concept has a distinct ideological nature and its development is not neutral. Its polysemic nature enables it to be adopted by many different positionings, from the New Public Management of the neoliberals, to the new social state of the neo institutionalists, or the community universalism of civil society and non-government organisations (Farinós, 2008). Being adopted by all institutional levels of government fulfils the objective of de-ideologising it, reducing it to the mere decision-making structures regarding the public realm (Centelles, 2006). Nevertheless, as indicated by Farinós, it is possible to consider governance from many different dimensions: multilevel governance between different political and administrative systems, governance as horizontal cooperation between sectoral and territorial policies, economic governance through networks of social actors and businesses and citizen participation (Farinós, 2006). Considering governance with respect to its potential in relation to civil society is precisely the objective of a critical analysis that goes beyond simple structures, converting it into a fighting mechanism, driving social creativity against exclusion and poverty. It constitutes a catalyst of democratic opportunities and of obtaining citizens' rights through new forms of more horizontal management.

Among them, civil society plays an important role as a local manager, participating in decision-making through consensus between the different actors involved: the market, the state and civil society (Pradel, 2007). It also acquires a central role within projects of social transformation, democratic expansion and participative governance (Bua et al. 2018; Della Porta & Felicetti 2019; Roth et

al. 2019; Blanco et al. 2020). Some authors, such as Swyngedouw, have been indicating for some time that this model has two sides, given that its underlying practices and discourses are often contradictory (Swyngedouw, 2005). According to this criticism, the model is based on the assumption that these new regulatory systems will generate a vicious circle, giving rise to economic growth, social cohesion and greater democracy. An example of this are the new and diverse management models that cities seek to develop through so-called governance in order to obtain a competitive position on a global level, without, in theory, putting internal social cohesion at risk. Therefore urban policies change direction in order to generate a proactive, dynamic and entrepreneurial role, seeking opportunities where the public and private sectors can implement joint actions that increase urban competitiveness, with the consequences that this brings about.

## 3. The governance of urban planning

One of the principal instruments of territorial hegemony of capital is an urban planning that converts the space into a good. Its most effective weapon is its disguise, based on knowledge systems, jargon and techniques that are incomprehensible to ordinary people. This shows us the potential of deploying citizen governance policies. In terms of urban planning, complacent, acritical and menial experts are crucial for power. With their aseptic contribution, a territorial design is created that favours the accumulation of capital, defining the land uses, which spaces will be developable or how the layout of the infrastructures (roads, ports, airports, etc.) will be shaped. The dominant class, capital and the state impose their logic in this way, appropriating the planning instruments through an abstract objectification of the space that is functionalist, quantifiable, Cartesian, cold and repressive.

Urban and territorial planning confers an artificial value to the space. Instead of defending its value of use which should meet the collective needs and common good, it favours its exchange value as a good with which to extract speculative profits. This subjection of the decision of the public administrations to the orders of capital robs the local population of major territorial and urban planning decisions. In other words, the most important issues, such as urban planning or the expansion of infrastructures are decided by the highest institutional levels, where the board of directors of large corporations are often confused with the public governments. In this way, the people are robbed of their power of decision regarding their space and also their future.

From the 1990s, despite the many and different forms of applying citizen participation, urban planning on a global level has been led proactively by governments, with major interventions, promoting private investments through different methods of attraction, such as tax incentives, urban branding or public-

private consortia. The renovations of the cities have followed homogeneous patterns, with highly significant results of socio-spatial segregation of the city, a territorial fracture between the globalised urban space and the rest of the physical and social framework (Somoza, 2013). Therefore, it could be said that the governance processes applied have not gone beyond the design of exchange structures and an increase in bureaucratisation.

However, if the goal is to establish elements of democracy and agreement in a true political and democratic dimension of citizen participation (Le Gales, 2007, cited by Somoza, 2013), it would be necessary to favour initiatives of general interest and the principle of subsidiarity, governed through social empowerment (Rojo, 2009; Romero and Farinós, 2011). The model of urban governance would provide what Geddes called major political assets: consensus between the actors involved, whatever the field of application of a policy; economic growth together with social cohesion through the right to participate and integration; and the combination of representative democracy with participative democracy with the involvement of the whole of society in the application of policies (Geddes, 2006).

The governance of urban planning should aspire to do everything necessary to decipher the territorial discourses which often only seek to overwhelm and demotivate citizens. The ruling class, capital and the state thereby administer the space to organise it so as to favour the accumulation of capital, commercialising every corner of the urban environment, putting well-being and sustainability at risk. Participating in the discussions and administrative processing phases of territorial and urban planning can be highly frustrating due to the hegemony of the desire for profit and the unsustainable growth paradigm. This can only be corrected through the democratic radicalism of knowledge and information, with the academic support of the self-organised and assembly-based neighbourhood fabric.

In the case of large cities such as Barcelona, these urban renovation processes have often been questioned (Capel, 2005; Casellas, 2006; Delgado, 2007; Borja, 2009) as they are sustained by public investments that have principally favoured the interests of capital and real estate business, leading to an increase in prices and the subsequent segregation processes. On the other hand, some authors such as Pradel advocate social innovation as a tool to reinforce territorial-based social relations on a neighbourhood or district level (Pradel et al., 2018) and thereby slow the dynamics of territorialised social exclusion. In this way, although the predominant neoliberal conception regards the neighbourhood as a resource for obtaining capital gains through gentrification, segregation and the overproduction of exclusive urban spaces (Davidson, 2008; Harvey, 1997), depoliticised from all possibility to actively construct and produce the city

(Letelier, 2018), the neighbourhoods have historically been relational spaces for voicing demands.

## 4. The neighbourhood scale in the city of Barcelona

The development of the industrial city in Spain in the 1950s was seen as an opportunity for real estate development in the metropolitan areas through urban renovation projects and the mass construction of new homes (Borja, 1975). The reforms adopted between 1969 and 1974 to order urban growth and the use of the land could not prevent the terrible living conditions in the new peripheral suburbs or the dreadful access to amenities, transport, etc. This reality gave rise to the emergence of a neighbourhood movement subject to the Law of Associations of 1964 (Letelier, 2018). Through the configuration of association networks, they became a first line political agents (Borja, 1975), participating directly both in the processes of urban negotiation and addressing broader social problems in an exercise of critical governance at the city and even regional level (Gail, 1980). These actions were mainly developed between 1976 and 1979, a time of an upsurge in the neighbourhood movement, the vindication of amenities and the opposition to large speculative projects (Bonet and Martí, 2012).

The consideration of neighbourhoods as exclusively relational spaces on a neighbourhood level at the end of the 1970s, reducing the importance of territorialism (Keller, 1979) meant that the neighbourhood spaces were only considered based on the relations prevailing within them on different levels (Harvey, 2012; Massey, 2012). This conception of urban fragmentation facilitated the creation of isolated, delimited spaces disconnected from the nearby global environment. Without a critical view of the neighbourhood as a place of global vindication, the neighbourhood struggles are unable to contribute to the structural aspects of the overall planning of the city, abandoning the political role of the neighbourhood existing in the 1960s, in response to the strategies of urban renovation (Letelier, 2018). Contemplating the neighbourhood without its radical critical point of view and reducing its scale to the relational dimension was a convenient strategy for applying governance policies in the 1980s, mainly focused on the management of aspects such as the development of the provision of services to the community, preventing the neighbourhood network from influencing the institutions and those responsible for the policies (Katznelson, 1982). The administrations absorbed the vindicative and transforming role and integrated this into a new scale of urban governance to combat the urban problems of tension, inequality, segmentation, the fragmentation of the urban landscape, the so-called “quartiers en crise” (Andersson & Musterd, 2005). .

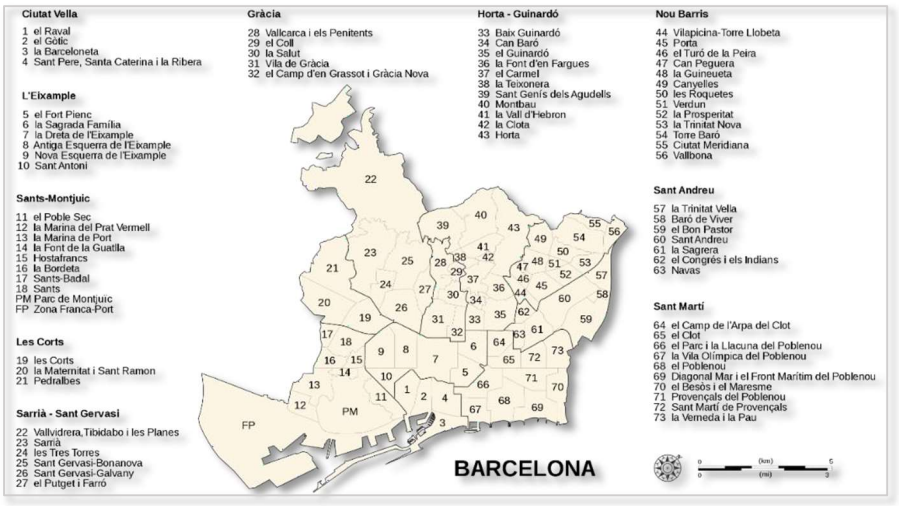
From 1979 to 1983 there was a period of new relations between the institutions and the neighbourhood associations of Barcelona, embodied in the Special Plans of Interior Reform (PERIs) which the first democratic governments in Barcelona (1979-1983) implemented in areas of special attention. In 1984, Barcelona regulated citizen participation and decentralisation in the districts, which increased the administrative competences of the territories (Borja, 2001), but also hindered the introduction of new deliberative components and the involvement of citizens in public affairs (Villasante & Gutiérrez, 2000). These measures, principally focused on regeneration and processes of social cohesion, have been seen from a critical perspective as testing laboratories for applying new urban policies (Martín, 2003) within liberal democratic governability (Atkinson, et al., 2009). After these actions are implemented, a neoliberal agenda is established to convert the city into a source of capital gains through gentrification, segregation and the overproduction of elitised urban spaces (Davidson, 2008; Harvey, 1997), rooted in the so-called "new localism" (Brenner & Theodore, 2002) and the transfer of responsibilities to local areas in a fragmented way. Therefore, the neighbourhood becomes a "communitarian trap" (Harvey, 1997), being responsible for finding the solution to global urban problems through the local community, appealing to the ethical content and radical community spirit typical of the neighbourhoods in the 1960s and 1970s (Letelier, 2018).

Between 1990 and 2000, the so-called Communitarian Plans were implemented focused on reinforcing the neighbourhood on a community level in areas where there were greatest shortfalls and creating rationalisation processes of citizen participation (Letelier & Valdosky, 2019). In 2004, these processes gave rise to the *Llei de Barris de Catalunya*, and with the initiative "*Els Barris de Barcelona"*, to the creation of the Consejo de Barrio (Neighbourhood Council), thereby institutionalising the channels of participation in an action of contention or political expropriation of neighbourhood representation (Leiva, et al., 2007). The consequences of the crisis and the unease that it caused in different areas of the city reactivated the role of the neighbourhood movement and its participation in the anti-austerity campaign, again showing that it still had articulation and politicisation potential. A result of this was the renewal of the progressive municipal government, which, in 2015 deployed the so-called Pla de Barris, with social, economic and urban measures for 16 of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2017). Five of them belong to the district of Nou Barris, included in three of the ten plans to be developed throughout the whole city, due to the special characteristics of the area. As we shall see later, they have a long tradition of neighbourhood vindications and associative movements.

## 5. The neighbourhood movement in Nou Barris

With the establishment of the first democratic local governments, in 1984, Barcelona shaped the map of the city based on a new territorial division into 73 neighbourhoods and 10 districts (Figure 1), including the 13 neighbourhoods of the eighth district called Nou Barris, taken from the name of the magazine of the Neighbours and Owners Association of the area in the year 1977. (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Districts of Barcelona

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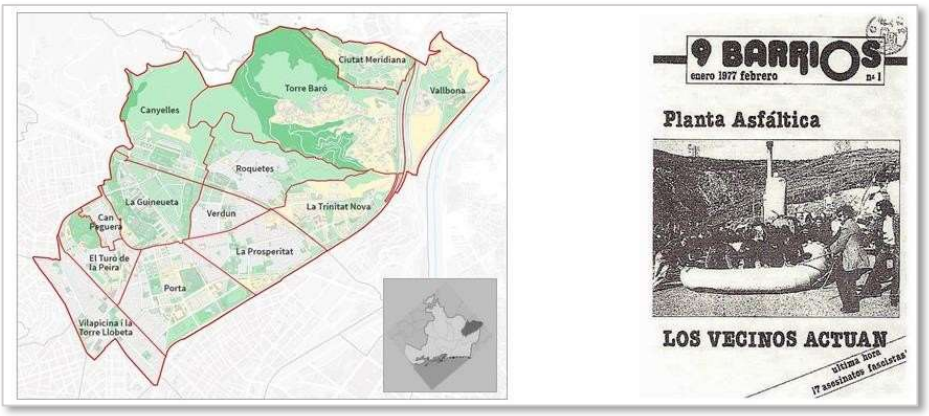
The current district has 13 neighbourhoods: Ciutat Meridiana, Vallbona, Torre Baró, les Roquetes, Trinitat Nova, Canyelles, Verdum, Prosperitat, Guineueta, Porta, Vilapiscina i Torre Llobeta, Turó de la Peira, Can Peguera (Figura 3), which account for 7.94% of the 101 km2 area of the city.

Figure 2. Neighbourhoods of the District of Nou Barris
Figure 3. First issue of the magazine 9 Barrios



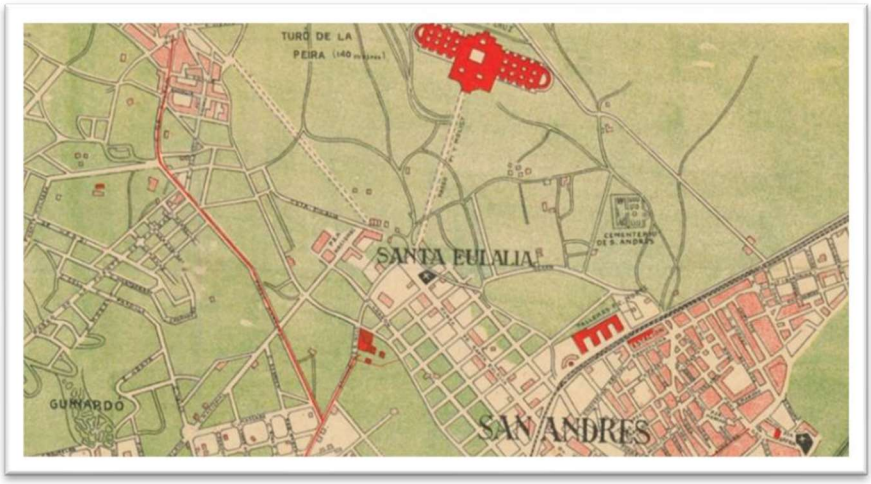

Sources: HansenBCN. Own work, Public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=3390681 y http://www.periodicosregalo.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/19.jpeg

According to the latest available data of 2022, the district has 170,736 inhabitants, 10.4% of the total population of the city, of which 40% are over the age of 85, which represents an over-ageing index higher than that of Barcelona (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2023). The majority of its population have average levels of education, with 3% considered as having no education and only 16.1% with university or higher education training, which is far removed from the city average of 34.6%. The levels of disposable family income are the second lowest in the whole of Barcelona (only behind the district of Ciutat Vella), with some of the poorest neighbourhoods of the city (Torre Baró and Ciutat Meridiana) and the highest unemployment rate of the 10 existing districts (13.5% of the total of Barcelona). Therefore, 25.2% of the population receives social benefits (PIRMI), the highest percentage of all the district. Between 2001 and 2010, the district experienced the greatest rise in its migrant population. In 2001 it received a little under 5000 people while in 2010 this figure had grown to 27,100. This pace has reduced in recent years. In 2022, the proportion of the foreign population reached 20%. This is lower than the average of Barcelona, but with large differences between the neighbourhoods, oscillating between 7.2% and 31.3% of migrants in different areas of the district (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2023).

Nou Barris is one of the districts that has undergone major transformations, drastically modifying its structure in less than a century; from large agricultural areas worked by a small number of farmers and small population nuclei to a

dense and diverse urban fabric. The first urban nuclei, formed around a medieval hostel and a chapel, dates back to the eighteenth century and had large farmhouses that were active until the second half of the twentieth century; only twenty have survived the real estate speculative process (Pauné, 2014), although some of them have given their names to neighbourhoods or emblematic parts of the new district. Between 1875 and 1877, the first actions to improve the area were taken and in 1884 the Local Council of Sant Andreu created the general urban plan for the Vilapiscina sector to prevent the proliferation of small urbanisations and enable harmonisation (Fabre, 1991: 34) (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Ordered growth of the suburbs from the Santa Eulàlia promenade (1916).




Source: Cartoteca Digital ICGC. http://cartotecadigital.icc.cat/cdm/singleitem/collection/catalunya/id/1335/rec/252

For a long time the area was used for municipal amenities that were too large to build in the urban centre of Sant Andreu, shaping a territory of "container spaces", such as the cemetery, factories, workshops or the first mental health building in Spain (1889), the Instituto Mental de la Santa Creu, located in the current neighbourhood of Guineueta (Figure 5).

The new dynamics and the boom in the residential construction activity in the periphery of Barcelona, occurring between 1897 and 1935, affected the whole area, when, in 1897, the municipality of Sant Andreu de Palomar was incorporated into Barcelona and the western part of the current district of Nou Barris began to grow, although in a slower and more dispersed way. Different urban plans and proposals, such as those of Ricard Alsina (1899), the Pla Jaussely (1905), or the Ciudad Jardín planned for the Torre Baró and Vallbona (1904), contemplated, to a greater or lesser extent, the development of the urban

network in the most mountainous areas of the district. Although none of them were fully implemented, they served as a base for subsequent urban plans (Pujol, 2003: 69).

Figure 5. Instituto Mental de la Santa Creu i Sant Pau.

Source: Noubarris.net, http://www.noubarris.net/web40/?p=63606

The 1920s marked the beginning of the urbanisation of the land of different neighbourhoods, such as Verdum or Prosperitat (with a modest and economic version of the garden city), Roquetes or Vilapiscina, through initiatives of owners or cooperatives; and the reservation by the City Council of land for the construction of two roads which would subsequently become two main arteries of the district and the city, the Vía Júlia and the current Ronda de Dalt.

From the 1940s, the district of Nou Barris grew significantly, giving rise to its current configuration. The years of the dictatorship and its management and the administration of the territory profoundly marked the idiosyncrasy of the district and its development. Between 1950 and 1970, the accelerated construction of poor quality real estate predominated, in which public actions were combined with private actions and self-construction projects, accompanied by a chronic deficit of services and facilities, with no connection with the rest of the city. This gave rise to a precarious urban plan that did not respond to the basic needs of the inhabitants (Borja, 1975; Domingo i Clota & Bonet i Casas, 1998). A working class population settled there, derived from the mass migratory population from

more depressed areas on a state level and attracted by the dynamism of the development that was occurring in the metropolitan area of Barcelona. The Plan Comarcal (District Plan) of 1953, attempted to provide an overall plan for the area of influence of Barcelona, but beyond facilitating the reservation of land for constructing the large fast metropolitan roads, it did not contemplate areas such as Nour Barris. This reality became the cornerstone of the many neighbourhood demands and vindications of the 1960s and 1970s, such as the planning and construction of a sewage network by the neighbours themselves in 1964, from which the phrase "urbanisation on Sundays" was coined (Figure 6).

The period which began in 1970 and lasted until well into the 1990s was characterised by a strong social and neighbourhood awareness, beginning with the founding of the Neighbourhood Association "9 Barris" and the fight against the Plan Parcial Torre-Baró-Vallbona-Trinidad Nueva (1969) (Naya, 2023). This plan prioritised major roads and the liberalisation of land, which gave rise to a greater volume of construction being placed in the hands of real estate companies, favoured by the direct interests of the city council (Valdosky, 2017). The need to transform the urban precariousness and the political characteristics of the aftermath of the Franco dictatorship constituted a catalyst for demonstrations, collaborative and neighbourhood organisation (Andreu, 2015) and trade union, political and church movements.

Figure 6. Urbanizar en domingo.

Source: Regillant Nou Barris. Arxiu Històric de les Roquetes – Nou Barris. http://www.noubarris.net/relligantnb/?p=2500

From this moment, the neighbourhood demands and struggles became a phenomenon that we could currently call democratic radicality. Governance understood as such did not exist and the different demands were channelled through direct actions of protest on the streets. Unlike the direct involvement in the construction of basic services of 1964, the action was impregnated with a political character, adding to the demands of the resolution of basic needs the questioning of the political actors regarding planning processes, decision-making and the steps taken.

There were many vindications of very different types. In addition to the demands for improved access to housing (emblematic in Canyelles and Guineueta affected by the expropriations carried out due to the construction of the Ronda de Dalt) (Figure 7), there were demands for the better planning of public spaces, as in the case of the Plaza Sóller in the Porta neighbourhood, in 1975-1976; the demand for the refurbishment of the Ronda de Dalt to be covered in its sections passing through the affected neighbourhoods; the construction of green spaces such as the Parque de la Guineueta (opened in 1971) or opposition to speculation and swindling carried out by the real estate sector in the Prosperitat neighbourhood.

On 19 July 1976, the Corporación Metropolitana de Barcelona (legal entity of the local government, created in 1974 to review and update the District Plan of 1953) approved the Plan General Metropolitano (General Metropolitan Plan), a new urban planning tool, which, among its objectives, sought to palliate the lack of facilities suffered by the Nou Barris district (Fernández, 2010). The implementation of this plan in the district was unequal and caused, for example, the direct rejection by 90% of the population of the Can Peguera neighbourhood. Protests were presented against the Plan due to the proposal to demolish the whole neighbourhood. Even today, there are remains of the consequences of this plan in a series of constructions classified as unique in the Passatge de Santa Eulàlia (Vilapiscina) and the neighbours still have unsurfaced roads.

Figure 7. Vindication of decent housing


Source: Regillant Nou Barris. Arxiu Històric de les Roquetes – Nou Barris. http://www.noubarris.net/relligantnb/?p=2500

On the other hand, the range of demands was broad, particularly referring to the need for a minimum provision of educational, sports, cultural and health facilities, embodied in the demands of the neighbours of Guineueta and Verdum for the Professional Training Centre; the lock-in in 1974 in the parish of Santa Engracia for the construction of the Sant Andreu Baccalaureate School which opened in 1984 or the continuance of a public kindergarten; the demands to Social Security for the installation of a Health Centre in Roquetas or the fight for the Mental Health Institute.

Given the characteristics of the orography of the neighbourhoods of the northern area (Roquetes, Torre Baró, Ciutat Meridiana, Vallbona) and its urban fragmentation, one of the greatest deficits was its connection via public transport. The government used the poor state of the roads to justify this deficit and the network was reduced to the bus service which did not run through most of the neighbourhoods with the narrowest and steepest streets. For this reason, throughout 1974, the neighbours of Roquetes seized the number 11 bus eleven times to demonstrate that it was possible to reach the neighbourhood. In the same way, a driver of line 47 (Plaza Cataluña to Guineueta), Manuel Vital, a neighbour of Torre Baró, seized the vehicle with which he worked in 1978 and drove it through the steep and winding streets, accompanied by other neighbours who joined his cause. This led to the expansion of the route six months later to the Canyelles neighbourhood. (Figures 8 and 9).

Figures 8 and 9. Bus seized to reach Torre Baró.

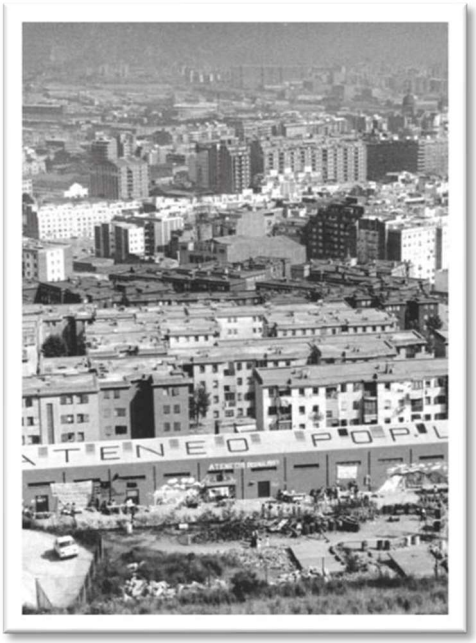

Source: Fernández, 2010. https://eltranvia48.blogspot.com/2010/09/manuel-vital-para-siempre.html?m=1

Following the tradition of the area when it formed part of the municipality of Sant Andreu in the 1970s, Nou Barris continued to house large facilities (container spaces), some that were even industrial and polluting. This was the case of an asphalt plant installed in the neighbourhood of Trinitat Nova in 1976, conflicting with the legal provisions that stipulated a minimum distance of two kilometres from inhabited areas. Built for producing the asphalt necessary for paving the II Cinturón (the current Ronda de Dalt), it was only active for a few days as the indignation of the neighbours regarding the smoke and contaminating fumes that it generated was such that an assembly was called and it was paralysed. In January 1977, five hundred people dismantled the chimney and staged a sit-in in the factory, which, from this moment was managed by the 9 Barris Pro-Athenaeum Organising Committee (CPA) (Ateneu popular de 9 Barris, 2018) (Figure 10 and 11). The initiative became a self-managed project for the development and democratisation of culture, currently a reference as a social project related to the circus on an international level.

Figure 10. Asphalt plant close to the residential housing (1976)

Source: Arxiu Ateneu Popular Nou Barris

Figure 11. Panoramic view of the Ateneu Popular Nou Barris during the 30 Hour Festival (4 and 5 June1977).



Source: Arxiu Ateneu Popular Nou Barris

In the same respect, there were companies that installed their factory installations in the district, mainly in Prosperitat, taking advantage of the proximity of the Meridiana road as an access way and the remodelling of the

Passeig Valldaura as an industrial estate. This gave rise to an increase in the demands of workers, such as those of Harry Walker, a car engine and accessories company (Pujol, 2003), among others.

This small sample of the many actions carried out by the neighbours of the district, from the lowest level of the urbanisation of the streets to the social amenities, shows that almost everything was obtained thanks to the fight of its inhabitants and almost always after the construction of housing. This is contrary to what a process of governance and urban planning would have looked like. When they existed the plans were conceived and designed without contemplating the territory as a whole but only their immediate scope. New urban planning models and different types of plan were imposed, ignoring the shape and natural elements of the territory. This gave rise to the juxtaposition of different urban layouts and a greater disconnection and marginality of the neighbourhoods between one another and in relation to the rest of the city (Navarro, 1997). The rapid execution of the plans multiplied the defects of their design, with the construction of very low quality housing with serious aluminosis problems and no collective services or amenities. In order to mitigate part of these dysfunctions, from the 1980s, the local governments sought ways to plan the empty spaces within the densification of the neighbourhoods. Converting the discontinuities in the layout into poles of attraction and points of civic communication constituted a challenge with respect to previous periods. Therefore, the first democratic local governments (1979) reinforced the neighbourhood initiatives that vindicated and fought to obtain all the basic amenities and services that they lacked. No other part of the city was as belligerent as that of Nou Barris, making it a historical reference.

During the 1980s, the district benefited from the local welfare system of Barcelona, characterised by the collaboration between civil society and the local government. The left-wing parties sought to develop a social and democratising agenda within a context of economic crisis and major social needs. The neighbourhood associations supported the city project and the association fabric of the neighbourhoods became consolidated and acquired a great decision-making capacity which enabled it to request a redistributive agenda and the promotion of profound urban reforms, particularly in the working-class neighbourhoods (Cano, et al., 2018).

The promotion of social cohesion was also sought through the establishment of citizen participation mechanisms and the reinforcement of community life in the neighbourhoods. Despite the recentralisation promoted from the Catalan government, more market-oriented and with less focus on social policies (Nel·lo, 2013), from 1984, with the decentralisation of the districts, long-term projects were developed and civic centres and neighbourhood centres were opened (such

as the Casal de Joves de Roquetes in 1980 or the Casal de Barri de Prosperitat in 1988), understood as spaces of free citizen and cultural expression.

In the same way, the Special Plans of Interior Reform (PERIs) were implemented, such as those of Roquetes and Torre Baró (1985), the latter barely applied or that of Prosperitat (1989). The Integral Plans accompanied the existing processes in the neighbourhoods, supporting grassroots experiences that responded to the objectives of the municipal government of urban renovation but also of participation and the consolidation of the association fabric in the management of facilities. Therefore, the business incubators brought about initiatives but also cultural associations such as the Nou Barris 9 or project or the Associació Juvenil Sobreàtic de Dinamitzacio Socio-Cultural, which, in 1992, began to self-manage the Casal de joves de Roquetes as a first experience of a self-reliant youth facility. This was followed a little later by Bidó Nou Barris, which, from 1994, began to manage the Ateneu Popular or the Coordinadora d'Associacions i Entitats de Nou Barris.

During the different socialist governments (1979-2011), the neighbourhood associations had a close relationship with the local government and constituted representatives of the neighbourhood demands, obtaining funds for the organisation of local festivals and other cultural activities. Little by little, the debts with the inhabitants of Nou Barris were paid off and the district began to integrate with Barcelona as another space of the city and was no longer seen as a suburban and marginal space. In this respect, an attempt was made to change the traditional concept of the working-class periphery (Fernández, 2010). However, at the same time, there was an institutionalisation of the demands. In this scenario the participative dynamics are enriched but civil society becomes fragmented; the demands are captured and the activist leaders are domesticated and the dynamics turn against one another at the heart of the social movements.

From the second half of the 1990s, Barcelona implemented the Community Development Plans as global projects that contemplated specific inclusion and local development actions. In the case of Nou Barris, after significant pressure from the local entities, community management became widespread (traditional in different neighbourhoods of the district) as a mechanism to manage the public cultural centres by the entities in collaboration with the local government.

A paradigmatic case is the Centro Cultural Ton i Guida, located in the building of the former school with the same name after many demands from the inhabitants of the Roquetes neighbourhood. The project, which was created in 1993, emerged as a result of the neighbourhood struggle and its self-management (which was achieved in 2002) was conducted through a platform of entities of the neighbourhood within the framework of civic management. Even today, it is an atypical facility which implements three levels of action with a wide diversity

of entities and neighbourhood activities (assuming the function of a civic centre) and it is also open to the rest of the city and is based on a type of co-management between the municipality and the citizen initiative.

In parallel, the city of Barcelona has participated in large mega projects and mega events that seem to follow a completely different line. Actions such as the refurbishment of the waterfront for the Olympic Games, the gentrification process of Raval or the Forum of Cultures drastically changed participation which shifted from being a right to an obligation, leading to the disaffection of the citizens who seemed to have lost control of the future of the city (Pradel, 2020). The post-industrial city was much more fragmented with an economic model based on tourism and which did not respond to the needs of the residents or reduce inequalities. The initial sensation of working towards a fairer city began to crumble and the population of Nou Barris, despite the urban and environmental improvements, did not feel like a participant in this city project or included in the so-called pride of belonging. Between the mid-1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, social mobilisation reduced and the entities of each neighbourhood began to focus more on their own individual realities (Cano, 2017). A certain level of coordination between the neighbourhood associations was maintained (Coordinadora d'entitats de Nou Barris) in aspects such as health, education, housing, employment and culture, but this did not translate into any significant joint action.

Two of the main war horses were, and continue to be, the scarcity of public housing policies that respond to the real situations of the citizens and immigration, for which new measures of self-management are being sought. Therefore, initiatives have arisen, such as the association for public and affordable rent (Associació 500×20); or the Red 9 Barris Acull, created in 2001 and currently made up of eighty entities, which work in a coordinated way to promote conviviality and facilitate the incorporation of new immigrant neighbours into the neighbourhoods and which, as an emblem, celebrates a famous international festival, The World Soup Festival (9bacull.org/es/).

The crisis of 2008 revitalised the decentralisation of the movements and the creation of neighbourhood social assemblies oriented towards political transformations, in the same way and driven by the anti-austerity movements. Initiatives to promote employment, the insertion and promotion of the sharing economy, such as the *Asamblea de parados y paradas de Nou barris*; community-based network initiatives for production, distribution and consumption according to ethical, democratic, ecological and solidarity criteria, such as the *Mercat ImPorta* (Social Market of Porta); the *Alianza contra la pobreza energética (Alliance against energy poverty)* (APE), created in 2014, to demand a new energy and natural resource management model in light of the crisis, to denounce the

deprivation of the population of access to basic resources (water, electricity, gas) and to modify the legal framework that guarantees them; the platform *Salvemos las pensiones 9 Barris*. All of these were agglutinated from 2012, when the demands were channelled into a general appeal formulated through a public manifest of demands (http://9bcabrejada.blogspot.com/p/manifest.html), bringing together more than 100 entities and their demands under the slogan: *Nou Barris Cabrejada,* and which, in 2014, published the report *"No es pobreza, es injusticia"* (Baquero, 2014; Nou Barris cabrejada, 2014) (Figure 12). Thanks to this, based on an extraordinary plan, the government of the district elaborated the "Plan de Acción para la cohesión y los derechos sociales de Nou Barris 2016-2019" [Action plan for cohesion and social rights of Nou Barris 2016-2019] (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2016).

Figure 12. Nou Barris cabreada. "No es pobreza, es injusticia" (2014).


Source: http://9bcabrejada.blogspot.com/

The election of Barcelona en Comú in 2015 as the leader of the local government brought about the emergence of more transversal social policies, with the development of citizen participation proposals which became sovereign and placed the discourse in the sphere of citizen rights (right to housing office, elimination of energy poverty, etc.). During this phase many new initiatives arose inspired by the mechanisms of the 1980s, this time creating new forms of association, management and relations with the government and the so-called grassroots governance spread from Nou Barris to other districts of the city.

From 2016, the implementation of the "Decidim" process by the city council brought together proposals to collectively elaborate the municipal action plan

(2016-2019) with the slogan: *"Construyamos una sociedad más abierta, transparente y colaborativa. Únete, participa y decide". [Building a more open, transparent and collaborative society. Join, participate and decide.]* (decidim.barcelona). This has involved the execution of different levels of action, including redevelopment and action plans for the district, plans for the protection of heritage, education plans, the elaboration of a low emissions plan, youth facilities, cultural and green spaces, special retail planning projects, the regulation of terraces, urban mobility (PMU), accessibility, the use of the public space, modifications to the General Metropolitan Plan in terms of the urban regulation of housing, gender equality, etc. In the case of Nou Barris, between 2016 and 2019, as well as the city projects, four specific plans were implemented: the facilities plan (2018), "Repensemos Trinitat Nova" (2017-2018), the redevelopment of La Meridiana (2016-2018) and the modification of the General Metropolitan Plan for the neighbourhood of Ciudad Meridiana (2018-2019).

In the period 2020-2023, there are plans to take a step further in the participative process of the Municipal Action Programme (PAM), promoting participative budgets for the first time for the whole of the city, reserving 75 million euros of the municipal budget for the neighbours to decide how to invest it in their districts. (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Informative campaign of participative budgets. Decidim Barcelona.


Source: Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2020.
https://www.decidim.barcelona/processes/PressupostosParticipatius?locale=es

Although this could initially appear to be an appropriate initiative and one of participative democracy, the neighbourhood associations, such as that of Prosperitat believe it to be a "bad idea" as this action does not seem to respect the agreements reached in the neighbourhood assemblies. In 2019, social

intervention plans were made by the residents addressing the needs and priorities of each neighbourhood for four years; the implementation of new processes by the City Council is perceived as a form of discrediting these assemblies, delegitimising them and "turning the neighbours and neighbourhoods against each other" (Elia Herranz, cited in López, 12/04/2020). The idea of a fair city for the residents goes a step further and once again places the institutional processes of tenocratisised democracy in conflict with a vindication of bottom-up democratic radical innovation. The spatiality and articulated form of neighbourhood action of the Nou Barris organisations enables them to act on a district scale, which bestows then with a political voice to communicate with the institutions (Bonet i Martí, 2012; Letelier & Valdosky, 2019).

## 6. Final reflection

Between 1950 and 1960, cities took shape in many different ways. The peripheral territories of the large cities, such as Barcelona, sprang up based on speculation or self-construction processes. The people settling in the peripheries such as Nou Barris knew nothing about partial plans, but necessity led them to organise themselves so as to construct marginal spaces, with no planning, equipping the neighbourhood with basic services and "urbanisation on Sundays".

The neighbourhoods of the 1960s and 1970s did not use the term governance, but they were deprived of rights and suffered the consequences of a lack of social justice. With their demands, they sought a fair and equal city, going beyond the basic recognised rights of citizenship, exercising what has been called real and radical democracy. Despite a kind of "domestication" and capture of the activist initiatives by the public administrations in the 1980s and 1990s, in neighbourhoods such as those referred to this this study, the associations were characterised by relevant and innovative elements, such as collective self-organisation sometimes combined with collaboration with the institutions, where the city council has been an economic and technical support partner but without leading the initiatives.

Repeated situations of uncertainty and abandonment caused by the economic crisis of 2008 or the COVID-19 crisis have led to the resurgence of participative processes that never completely disappeared. In these processes, voluntary reciprocity prevails through decision-making mechanisms, involving those affected by the dynamics of exclusion, empowerment and collective organisation, where the pertinent professionals and experts are a complement, generating innovative ways of organisation. In short, they are bottom-up participative actions of radical democratic innovation which take the tecnocratisation of democracy a step further so as to continue working towards a truly fairer city. Some have called it the era of citizen tecnopolitical emancipation. New forms of organisation, coordination and civic action, with

new ethics and new methodologies are enabled by new tools, spaces and actors, which require democratic institutions able to adapt, innovate and respond (Peña, 2019). As suggested by Blanco, these new informal practices and narratives formed the basis of the rebirth of participative governance associated with the government of Barcelona en Comú (2015-2019), as the dynamics of participative governance depends on the relationship between the rules, practices and narratives (Blanco et al., 2022). This could generate a very different type of dynamics and diverging paths of governance, as shown by Bua & Bussu in their "Locating Governance-driven democratization (GDD) and Democracy-driven governance (DDG) spaces of democratization in dynamic relationship" in the case of Barcelona or Nantes (Bua & Bussu, 2021; Bua et al., 2023).

Therefore, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, it is equally necessary to conserve and expand "the democratic common senses of the masses arising from the popular struggles in the streets and squares" (Aguiló, 2014:81). An emancipating "new culture" needs to be constructed based on radical policy (Gramsci, 2018), which, in reality, is not so new but has inherited the "social footprint" left by popular movements (Calle, 2005) through demands, democratic complementarity and citizen empowerment, which already existed in the self-management of popular neighbourhoods in districts such as Nou Barris. The different platforms have contributed, particularly in the city of Barcelona, to politicising neighbourhood action, vindicating social-spatial inequalities related not only to the local context but also to global processes (Massey, 2012). They weave strategic territorial relations on a complementary scale going beyond fragmentations and define a political character for the neighbourhood relations, constituting grassroots instruments and participants.

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