Empowering Neighbourhoods: Keeping Barcelona's Community Spaces Alive

ECIU – Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Stream 3 - Identify best practices in promoting social cohesion through community facilities

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Introduction

Barcelona is known for its rich civic culture and vibrant neighborhoods. However, like many European cities, it is facing growing challenges - social fragmentation, generational divides, and the diminishing presence of public, accessible spaces. Our project, developed within Stream 3 of the ECIU Challenge, focuses on identifying best practices for promoting social cohesion through community facilities.

Guiding Questions and Context

The central question we explored was:
How can we rethink public facilities in Barcelona so that they remain locally driven spaces of connection, belonging, and inclusion?

To guide our process, we broke this down further into three key questions:

- How do participatory practices in community media and facilities foster social cohesion among diverse groups?
- What role do community media platforms (e.g., La Veïnal, Ràdio RSK) play in facilitating participation and trust-building?
- Which types of community center activities are perceived as inclusive across generations and cultures?

Methodology

We approached this challenge with a mix of research and fieldwork aimed at deeply understanding the lived realities of local residents and the people behind community-run spaces. Our methodology included:

- A literature review to ground ourselves in existing theory and practice
- Site visits to community facilities such as *Canòdrom*, *Biblioteca Trinitat Vella*, *Nau Bostik*, and *Biblioteca Ignasi Iglesias - Can Fabra*
- A survey answered by 11 staff members and practitioners across these centres
- Interviews with residents from the neighbourhoods of *Nou Barris* and *Sant Andreu*, two areas with distinct demographic and socio-economic profiles

These activities helped us identify both systemic strengths and practical challenges faced on the ground.

Early Research Resources:

As a starting point, before our mobility week in Barcelona, we researched some available online sources in order to better prepare ourselves for the mobility week and find out what challenges and solutions to public facility management have been analysed by experts across the world. We based our understanding on the following five sources:

1.https://whatworkswellbeing.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Places-spacespeople-wellbeing-May2018V2_0119660900.pdf - UK review of various social initiatives.

2. Emmanuel, M., Olagoke, J., & Obaribirin, A. (n.d.). Architectural design as a catalyst for social inclusion: The impact of community center architecture on social inclusion in Lagos State.

3. Moustakas, L. (2022). Sport for Social Cohesion: Transferring from the Pitch to the Community? Social Sciences, 11(11), 513. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11110513

4. Pieter Breek, Eshuis, J., Hermes, J., & Mommaas, H. (2018, July 7). The role of social media in collective processes of place making: a study of two neighbourhood blogs in Amsterdam.

5. Gatti, F., & Procentese, F. (2022). Ubiquitous local community experiences: unravelling the social added value of neighborhood-related social media. PSICOLOGIA DI COMUNITA', 2, 56–79. https://doi.org/10.3280/psc2022- 002004.

Early Research Findings:

After analysing the research related to our field of interest, we had the following insights from each corresponding source:

1 - Temporary events improve social relations and community cohesion. Green and blue areas increase wellbeing and positive behavioural change. It is important for community members to be involved in organizing and planning changes to places and spaces.

2 - Architectural design is key and it includes accessibility for everyone, aesthetics, cultural sensitivity and flexible space.

3 - Community sports can act as a catalyst for social cohesion, breaking down cultural or social barriers and fostering a sense of belonging and community spirit. They facilitate meeting new people and make the population healthier.

4 and 5 - Neighbourhood blogs and social media presence can foster group solidarity and strength community bonds, while simultaneously building a local brand and identity.

Early Research Solutions:

The findings from our research led us to think of some early proposals on how community facilities and the local media can better support the local community to bring about a sense of inclusion, dialogue and local pride. The early solutions were as follows:

1 - Festivals and celebrations – generate positive memories associated with the local area and pride. Green and blue areas provide a better quality of life. It is advised to consult the local population and involve them in the creation of new initiatives.

2 - Architectural design – a mural could be collaboratively painted to highlight history and a wall decorated to celebrate diversity. Renovation, benches and lifts are all a key part of the ecosystem.

3 - Multi-functional community sports facilities – a pitch for team sports (football), walking club, yoga or pilates club, with regular events and meetings would be all be beneficial.

4 and 5 - Neighbourhood blogs, social media presence, radio and TV – they could highlight daily life, achievements and local heroes, serve as an online marketplace, share informative content (history, fun facts) and engaging content (ask questions, share a story), as well as give announcements.

Quotes

It was of our interest to state in this work some of the most relevant quotes mentioned by either public workers, volunteers or artists who were in charge of showing us the different types of public management facilities we had the chance to visit. This way, their ideas would help us determine what are the key elements that must be considered, in their first-hand opinion, when presenting solutions. We summarised them into the following quotes:

"The activities people enjoy most are the ones outdoors - not workshops hidden behind walls." - Sergi, social worker at Canòdrom

"Nau Bostik is known for its art scene. People come here to enjoy and share different forms of art - art brings people together." - Pablo, artist at Nau Bostik

"We need to go to the people instead of waiting for them to come to us." - Emma, Director of Biblioteca Trinitat Vella

"There's a Catalan word I love: xarxes (networks) ... without networks, cohesion in Barcelona doesn't make sense." - Candelaria, tour guide

Resident Interview Structure:

As part of our fieldwork, we created a survey, which we asked residents who attend public community activities to fill in. It focuses on understanding how local community spaces and media contribute to social inclusion, dialogue, and collective identity within two specific neighbourhoods: Nou Barris and Sant Andreu in Barcelona. It consists of 11 questions and is designed to gather insights into residents' experiences and perceptions related to participation in community activities. The form asks respondents about how often they visit community spaces, how comfortable they feel expressing opinions there, whether they interact with people from different cultural or age groups, and how well they feel represented by the organizers. It also explores whether people feel a sense of belonging, how inclusive and accessible the activities are, and whether they engage with local media like neighbourhood radios or social platforms. Overall, the survey centres around themes such as community inclusion, dialogue, and local cultural identity. We will present the exact questions which we asked residents, as well as the findings, in a later section.

Fieldwork Results – Residents:

Furthermore, the survey for residents' participation in community activities provided us with the following insight:

- Two thirds of the answers were received from people spending most of their time on the neighbourhoods of Nou Barris - Les Roquetes and Sant Andreu - Fabra.
- 45% said they visit public spaces once per month and another 45% expressed they visit them once per week. Nonetheless everyone said that they all felt well welcomed the first time they attended no matter what public activity.
- On the question if they feel comfortable expressing their ideas and opinions during the different activities, 91% agreed with the statement, and mentioned that all the activities are well accessible and interesting enough for everyone.

- 36,4% of the surveyed let us know that they always interact with people from different cultures and backgrounds, whereas only 1 person answered that they do not interact with anyone.
- When asking them if they felt part of the community they belong to, 91% of the answers were, again, positive, with only one expressing otherwise.

This last was a significant answer provided by an 82-year-old local resident who attended daily the same spot at the library to read the newspaper, and when we asked him about his lack of wish to engage in the community, he expressed he did not feel part of the community. At the end of the interview, he mentioned that he would very much like a chess tournament so as to get to know more people.

- When asked if the different public spaces represent the identity and local culture of their community, only 18,2% were disappointed, whereas the rest let us know they were very satisfied with their public spaces in terms of representing their identity, although some suggested some improvement that were taken into account towards the final proposals of this work.
- More than half of the surveyed do not participate on local media, and only 18,2% of them does
- When asked if they engaged with people socially excluded or from different age group than them, everyone expressed different answers but, overall, they were positive ones.

The responses suggest that public spaces in these neighbourhoods serve as vital hubs for building community and fostering a sense of belonging. People don't just attend activities - they feel genuinely welcomed and empowered to participate, which indicates a strong foundation of trust and openness. The frequent use of these spaces, combined with a high level of comfort in sharing ideas, points to a community that values inclusion and mutual respect.

What also emerges is the social role these spaces play in connecting individuals across cultural and generational lines. The presence of meaningful interaction between people from diverse backgrounds suggests that public events are successfully facilitating dialogue and understanding among groups that might not otherwise connect. Even in cases where someone feels disconnected, the desire to engage through specific activities, like a chess tournament, highlights the importance of designing events that resonate with different interests and needs.

Cultural representation in public spaces appears to be well-received, which reinforces the idea that when communities see their identities reflected in shared environments, they are more likely to invest in them emotionally and socially. Meanwhile, the limited engagement with local media reveals a gap between everyday community life and how it

is communicated or shared publicly, pointing to an opportunity for media platforms to play a more active role in strengthening local connections.

Overall, the data reflects a community that is socially active, largely inclusive, and open to greater engagement. With thoughtful improvements in outreach, accessibility, and tailored programming, the cohesion that already exists could be deepened further, reaching those who remain on the margins and encouraging even broader participation.

Community Facility Workers Survey Structure:

We also created a second survey aimed at public workers in different community spaces, which we distributed amongst community facility workers in the Northern neighbourhoods of Barcelona and allowed us to obtain feedback from both the side of the organisers, in addition to the point of view of the residents. This survey explores how different social groups engage with community life and how local initiatives can foster greater social cohesion. It focuses on identifying which groups or collectives are the most difficult to involve in social and community activities, asking participants to reflect on barriers to inclusion. It also invites respondents to share what types of events or activities they believe are most effective in strengthening social bonds and building a sense of collective belonging. Additionally, the survey examines the role of local broadcasting media, such as neighbourhood radio, community television, or online platforms, in promoting inclusion, dialogue, and active participation. The three questions which we asked are presented below, while the findings from them are presented in a later section:

- Which social groups or collectives are most difficult to involve in social and community activities?
- What types of activities or events are most productive in terms of social cohesion?
- How can local media enhance social cohesion?

Fieldwork Results – Community Facility Workers:

We obtained several answers for both designed surveys, which provided us a complete and thorough view of what the reality of public facilities and the different activities that are carried out in them is. The results also helped us elaborate some of the final proposals, attending their needs.

On the one hand, on the question addressed to public workers about what are the social groups that remain on the margins of community engagement, these are the following:

- Professionals and creatives with limited time or a belief that community centres are "not for them"
- Highly active citizens already overcommitted in civic or political work
- Isolated or disadvantaged individuals who may lack the confidence or support to attend events
- Middle-aged adults (36-65), who are often caught between youth and senior-oriented programming and don't see themselves reflected

We asked them what types of activities or events are most productive in terms of social cohesion, and we observed that informal, participatory, and culturally rooted initiatives

are especially effective in bringing people together. Respondents emphasized that everyday spaces and shared experiences help foster trust and long-term engagement.

They pointed to:

- Community-driven leisure and cultural spaces, like dance collectives or local festivals
- Relational environments such as bars or shared meals, especially when paired with project involvement
- Multidisciplinary workshops that invite diverse participation
- Parent associations and grassroots sports as key entry points for families and youth

These responses highlight that cohesion doesn't come from large-scale interventions alone, but it grows from regular, accessible spaces where people feel they belong and have a role to play.

Cómo pueden los medios de retransmisión locales potenciar la cohesión social?

4 responses

Dar voz a las actividades organizadas por las entidades en cada territorio
Compartir carteles i hacer noticias sobre lo que pasa en los barrios.
Formar parte de los espacios de participación.

Tener el vecindario informado és el primer paso para tenerlo implicado y activo, por lo que los medios locales alternatives tienen un papel importante ya sea ràdio O premsa, en papel O online

Haciendo difusión y promoción de las actividades locales

Desgraciadamente los medios locales no tienen medios, valga la rebundancia. Pero en algunas localidades podrían estar mucho más acercamiento a lo que hace el movimiento vecinal. Pero sobre todo necesitan un cambio que les lleve a la parte de retransmisión de valores en vez de al suceso. A dar fuerza a la colaboración y actos de apoyo mutuo de la localidad.

We also asked them what could be improved by the local media in order to improve public cohesion, and we observed that community media platforms play a crucial role in informing, inviting, and empowering residents. Several participants shared that these media outlets helped make community spaces more visible and approachable. Respondents told us they want to see:

- More promotion of activities and resources
- Greater involvement of local voices, especially youth
- Platforms used to amplify community stories, not just advertise events
- Less duplication and more collaboration across channels

Community media has the potential to be much more than a megaphone - it can be a participatory tool that helps shape local identity.

Final Proposals:

Based on all that we have learned and discovered over the past few months, including through the literature review, survey answers by public facility workers and locals, we came up with a set of engaging, practical and low-cost ideas to help reimagine how community spaces can work better for everyone:

Creative Open-Air Engagement

- Set up a giant blank canvas or mural wall outside a facility and leave paints or markers for people to contribute over time. Display the finished result indoors as a collective art piece.

Engaging Older Adults

- Launch "Chatty Wednesdays", where local bakeries sell items at a facility - but only if customers sit and chat with someone new before making a purchase.

Inclusive Games & Competitions

- Organize a chess championship inside libraries to bring together different age groups.
- Host team-based games mixing youth, adults, and elders, ending in a neighbourhood-wide championship.

Community Clean-Up & Celebration

- Coordinate community clean-up drives with tools provided by the city. End the day with food, music, and celebration to turn labour into bonding.

Photo & Creativity Contests

- Hold contests where residents submit photos or quirky objects from their homes. Winners get featured on local media and inside the facility, drawing more people in.

Seasonal and Fun Events

- Host foam parties in summer or municipal Tió celebrations during winter to attract families and young people.

Language Workshops

- Organize free, open language swaps where migrants and locals teach each other the basics of their native languages through games, food, and conversation.

Cultural Evenings

- Invite residents from different backgrounds to host a night about their culture, including music, food, demonstrations, and trivia quizzes. Free and open to all.

Conclusion

Barcelona's neighbourhoods already have the ingredients for strong social cohesion - people, passion, creativity, and space. But these need to be better connected, activated, and sustained.

The community centers we visited are doing vital work, but we believe they can go further by:

- Designing inclusive and fun formats that cross generational and cultural lines
- Creating low-barrier entry points for new participants
- Using community media not just for outreach but for storytelling and participation

We believe that connection can be designed. And when done right, community facilities can become more than service providers - they can become platforms which foster and strengthen sentiments of inclusion, dialogue and local identity.

Annex

The work was distributed evenly amongst all team members, with everyone contributing to the literature review, creating and carrying out the surveys, analysing the results and creating the final presentation and report.

We declare that this document is our original work. We have tried our best to acknowledge the authors where necessary and have not consciously plagiarised any information.

We also declare that AI tools have been used in the creation of our work. They have helped us with generating ideas and summarising information.