

Housing Revolutions in Working-Class Urban Peripheries. The Case of Barcelona

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This article jointly and relationally considers the social circumstances and morphological aspects involved in the transformation of urban peripheries during the second half of the 20th century. The evolution of this residential territory generates a new framework of daily life, coexistence, socialization and mobilization. To this end, the Nou Barris district in Barcelona has been selected as a case study due to its significance in relation to successive revolutions in housing: the revolution of the residential landscape, the revolution of the domestic space, the homeownership revolution, and the revolution of urban social movements.

Keywords: Urban outskirts, Housing, Barcelona, Property, Struggles

Introduction

Colin Ward, a prominent figure in the British anarchist movement since the 1950s, employed the metaphor of revolutions to elucidate his vision of the evolution of housing during the central decades of the second half of the 20th century¹. In the introduction to his book *Talking Houses*, a compilation of 10 lectures summarizing 30 years of observation of the housing problem in Great Britain, Ward reflects on the need for a struggle on the part of a large percentage of the inhabitants to exercise their right to decent housing, a struggle that, according to him, takes the form of three revolutions. The first is the revolution of tenure in favor

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¹ C. Ward, *Talking houses: ten lectures*, Freedom Press, London 1990.

of ownership, which became the dominant model after World War II. The second is the revolution of services and residential densities, catalyzed by the arrival of technical networks in the home, and the implicit and silent changes of roles in reproductive tasks. The third is the revolution in the nature of households, with the disappearance of the standard nuclear family model at the end of the 20th century. In this study, we will now extend this analysis to the urban scale, incorporating our own interpretation to continue the discourse on housing revolutions, while acknowledging some of the layers of observation mentioned by Ward.

A seminal factor in the formation of urban peripheries throughout history has been the set of issues related to housing access. A plethora of transformations in the peripheral areas of various European cities during the second half of the 20th century originated in circumstances linked to the housing problem. On the one hand, social circumstances, principally related to the arrival of immigrant populations seeking job opportunities and accommodation, can be identified. Conversely, issues pertaining to housing production, in which the role of the real estate market and the construction sector must be considered, along with the morphological impact of new residential production in urban expansion areas, are also of significance. The urban planning management of new peripheral areas of the city and the promotion of large-scale housing operations in these areas are matters that must be analyzed to understand the impact of building development on the configuration of city peripheries.

In order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena of urban transformation taking place in new peripheral environments, it is advisable to consider social circumstances and the morphological aspects together and relationally. The transformation of this residential landscape generates a new territory, a new framework for daily life, coexistence, socialization, and mobilization. To explore this framework, the focus is directed towards the periphery of Barcelona, with specific reference to the district of Nou Barris, located to the north of the city. This district is chosen as a case study due to its significance in relation to the successive revolutions that took place in relation to housing². The question then arises as to why Barcelona and not any other city with similar characteristics. The rationale for selecting Barcelona as a case study is threefold. Firstly, it serves as a paradigmatic example of the construction of a Mediterranean city with certain industrial importance. Secondly, it offers a model of social relations, forms

² J. Fabre, J. M. Huertas, *Nou Barris. La penúltima Barcelona*, Ajuntament de Barcelona, Barcelona 1991.

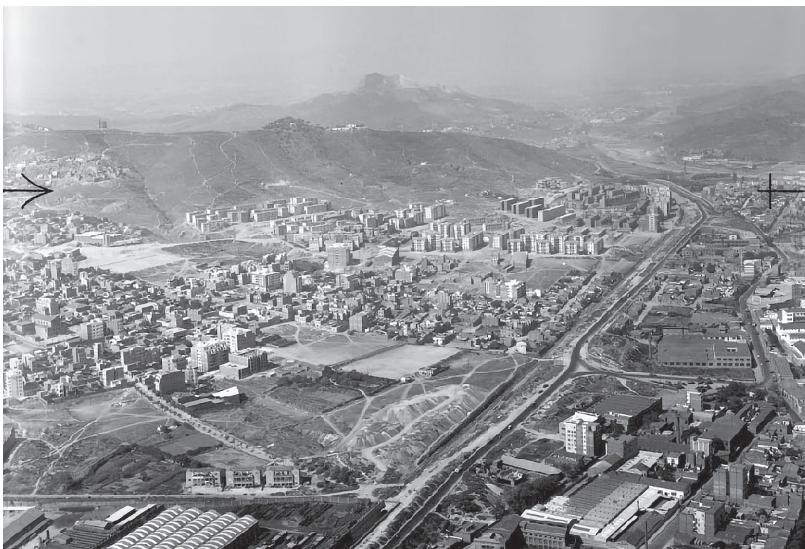


Fig. 1. General view of Nou Barris, 1963 (Source: J.L. Oyón Bañales, M. Guàrdia Bassols, M. Rosselló Nicolau, D. Hernández Falagán, J. Roger Gonçal, *La Revolució de l'habitatge a les perifèries obreres i populars: Nou Barris 1939-1980*, MUHBA - Ajuntament de Barcelona, Barcelona 2021, p. 73)

of housing tenure, struggles for public space, and collective claims that are reproduced in Southern European countries. This city model underwent a series of consecutive revolutions in the second half of the 20th century, which bear a resemblance to the revolutions described by Colin Ward³. Firstly, there was a morphological revolution of the residential landscape, which resulted in urban growth and the exploration of different building models⁴. This was due to a combination of self-construction processes, massive housing developments, and processes of densification and replacement of original urban fabrics. Secondly, the revolution of domestic space is evident, driven by the configuration of a new cohabitation framework in which lifestyles, residential surfaces, or the organization of cohabitation groups undergo profound transformation⁵. Thirdly, there is the revolution

³ K. Jacobs, *The writings of Colin Ward and the legacy of anarchism for housing studies*, in "Housing Studies", 2024, pp. 1-18.

⁴ J.L. Oyón, *La quiebra de la ciudad popular. Espacio urbano, inmigración y anarquismo en la Barcelona de entreguerras, 1914-1936*, Ediciones del Serval, Barcelona 2008.

⁵ J.L. Oyón et al., *La suburbanización de la clase obrera: vivienda, inmigración y movimientos sociales en el área metropolitana de Barcelona, 1918-1975*, in *Sociedades y cultura*, Prisma Editorial, Oviedo 2020.

of the tenure model, due to the profound cultural change represented by property ownership access from the 1960s. The peculiarity of this revolution is that it was the working classes in popular peripheries that led the model change. Finally, a fourth revolution is evident in the emergence of urban social movements advocating for the right to housing, particularly in peripheral areas where demands for enhanced living conditions in new neighborhoods are prevalent.

As will be demonstrated in the following sections, the selection of the Nou Barris district as a subject of observation is associated with its paradigmatic relationship with the four models of revolutions documented in this research. Firstly, Nou Barris serves as an exemplar of urban transformation on the periphery of the planned city of Cerdá's Ensanche, illustrating the integration of self-construction processes, densification, and deployment of housing estates⁶. It is noteworthy that Nou Barris also stands as a testament to the profound transformation of typological models, particularly evident in housing estates, and is home to the largest immigrant population in the city. The district has undergone a remarkable shift in the percentage of home ownership, a phenomenon that stands in stark contrast to the humble origins of its urban structure. Nou Barris is not merely a geographical entity; it is a symbol of the urban struggles that resonated throughout Barcelona, particularly during the final years of Franco's regime.

In order to comprehend the specific context of Barcelona, primary data sources have been employed. These sources encompass annual statistical summaries published by the Barcelona City Council, as well as digitized census data from the 1970, 1975, and 1978 population registers. Furthermore, the 1970 housing census and digitized Cadastre data have been consulted, along with permits for private buildings and urban planning documents from the aforementioned period, which are available at the Contemporary Municipal Archive of Barcelona. Other resources include newspaper archives and neighborhood documentation within the city, and a detailed review of the legislative production related to housing at each moment.

⁶ A. Ferrer, *Vivienda y vivienda social en el área metropolitana de Barcelona. Una visión retrospectiva*, in *Vivienda y sociedad. Nuevas demandas, nuevos instrumentos*, Editorial Milenio, Lleida 2006, pp. 537-558.

The residential landscape revolution

The most significant urban landscape revolution of the mid-20th century is of particular interest in this regard. However, it is important to specify how this transformation occurred. In the field of architecture and urban design, it has been commonplace to associate urban transformation processes with heroic planning moments⁷. A paradigmatic case of urban expansion design is provided by the layout of the Eixample, which was projected in 1859 by Ildefons Cerdà⁸. However, it is evident that the urban revolution of the 20th century is intrinsically linked to population growth processes, which are predominantly driven by migration flows from rural to urban areas. A thorough examination of demographic data reveals that the Eixample experienced negligible population growth between the 1950s and 1970s⁹, with the exception of a few years. Conversely, the peripheral districts, particularly the Nou Barris district, experienced a population surge of over 20,000 inhabitants per neighborhood over a span of two decades.

This phenomenon is further compounded by the fact that the Nou Barris district is administratively divided into thirteen distinct neighborhoods, underscoring the magnitude of the population shift. The subsequent transformation of the district, both in terms of its social fabric and its physical infrastructure, is nothing short of remarkable.

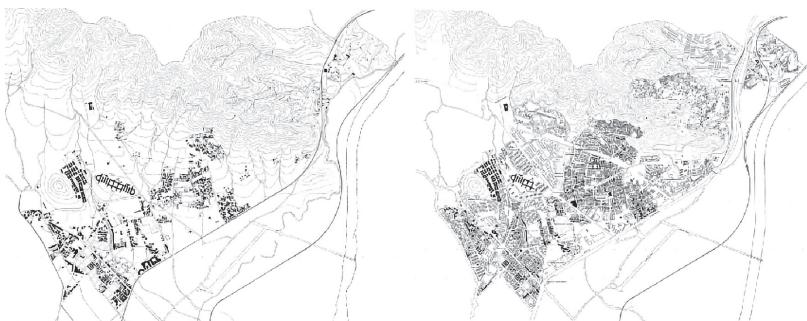


Fig. 2. Urban growth of Nou Barris between 1950 -left- and 1975 -right- (Source: Author's own production)

⁷ J. Monclús, C. Díez Medina, *Modernist housing estates in European cities of the Western and Eastern Blocs*, in "Planning Perspectives", XXXI, 2016, 4, pp. 533-562.

⁸ I. Cerdà, *Teoría general de la urbanización y aplicación de sus principios y doctrinas a la reforma y ensanche de Barcelona*, Instituto de Estudios Fiscales, Barcelona 1968.

⁹ J.L. Oyón et al., *La Revolució de l'habitatge a les perifèries obreres i populars: Nou Barris 1939-1980*, MUHBA - Ajuntament de Barcelona, Barcelona 2021.

The model of city fabric growth associated with this demographic explosion does not follow a planned urban strategy; on the contrary, the initial configuration of these urban areas usually occurs through the spontaneous occupation of territories originally intended for agricultural use. The forms of occupation of these agricultural plots, and their subsequent subdivision processes, along with the orographic conditions, often become the formal determinants of areas of urban expansion. These conditions subsequently served as the foundation for the consolidation of these territories as irregular, heterogeneous, and dense urban layouts between the 1950s and 1970s. In this transformation, it is crucial to identify the conditions of city growth, as urban planning is deemed to be an ineffective vector¹⁰. Prior to the Civil War in the 1940s, the process of spontaneous colonization occurred through semi-regular settlements, which were partly self-built¹¹. In the ensuing decades, this self-managed city underwent growth through two principal processes: ordered densification and development in the gaps of housing developments.

In the context of urban densification, it is imperative to comprehend the sequential progression of developmental phases. Primarily, rural land parcels are acquired at a nominal cost, exhibiting a paucity of amenities. These parcels are subdivided and subsequently sold in fragments, with prospective buyers erecting rudimentary dwellings under the guise of leisure orchards¹². The compact dimensions of these plots (4.5-6m) result in the formation of linear blocks of compact single-family housing, constructed between party walls, which gradually define the layout of the emerging urban space¹³. This initial densification phase is characterized by the addition of floors to these compact structures, ranging from ground floor plus one to ground floor plus two, serving as modest residential expansions that facilitate familial regrouping or the establishment of new cohabiting units. A subsequent phase of densification will be marked by the replacement of plots to accommodate high-rise housing, a strategy that leverages urban regulations. The third phase of densification will occur when the replacement process affects multiple plots, thereby transforming the irregular and heterogeneous urbanization of densified houses into residential blocks.

¹⁰ A. Ferrer, *Els polígons de Barcelona*, Edicions UPC, Barcelona 1996.

¹¹ J.L. Oyón et al., *La suburbanización de la clase obrera*, cit.

¹² M. Tatjer, *De lo rural a lo urbano: parcelaciones, urbanizaciones y ciudades jardín en la Barcelona contemporánea (1830-1930)*, in “Catastro”, XV, 1993, pp. 53-60.

¹³ J.L. Oyón, C.G. Soler, *Las segundas periferias, 1918-1936: una geografía singular*, in *Vida obrera en la Barcelona de entreguerras*, CCCB, Barcelona 1998.

These blocks are typically promoted by builders who identify a residential market in the periphery that offers speculative opportunities. In contrast, attempts at organized construction of housing developments are underway.

Indeed, it can be argued that housing developments do not emerge as a result of a deliberate planning process; rather, they are a reactive response to prevailing housing needs, executed by the individuals responsible for urban management. A curious phenomenon, particularly in the case of Barcelona, is that the volume of housing constructed through densification processes has consistently exceeded that of planned neighborhoods in nearly every decade of the second half of the 20th century. This is a counterintuitive outcome with significant ramifications for the social construction of neighborhoods¹⁴. Initially, densification processes were associated with the regrouping of families that had been geographically separated due to migratory patterns. This process can be regarded as the initial phase in the reproduction of social, friendship and work collaboration networks that were previously present in rural areas. These networks, once established in urban neighborhoods, serve to homogenize the social stratum of the inhabitants, thereby facilitating the emergence of networks of daily relations.

In summary, this initial revolution is initiated by self-built neighborhoods, complemented by planned housing developments, and consolidated with the processes of densification and replacement of the initial constructions. Consequently, the resulting city is a remarkable combination of self-built layouts, residential developments, and consolidated irregular cityscapes, a phenomenon not exclusive to Barcelona but observed in numerous locations. A notable example of this phenomenon is visible in the city of Rome, where the spontaneous urban development merges with the planned urban expansion along its outskirts, as evidenced by the picturesque district of Pigneto¹⁵. Consequently, the building boom that occurred during the 1960s and 1970s was predominantly driven by individuals' efforts to address their housing necessities, rather than being primarily influenced by urban planning initiatives.

The revolution of the domestic space

The domestic space is the sphere most immediately related to the revolution of the urban landscape. Specifically, when referring to the processes of den-

¹⁴ J.L. Oyón et al., *La revolución residencial de la periferia en Barcelona, 1939-1980: Nou Barris como estudio de caso*, in "Geocrítica. Scripta Nova", XXV, 2021, 2, pp. 271-306.

¹⁵ K. Lelo et al., *Socio-spatial inequalities and urban transformation. The case of Rome districts*, in "Socio-Economic Planning Sciences", LXVIII, 2019.

sification, it is essential to recognize the housing context under discussion. Understanding the processes of densification as a fundamental factor in this urban revolution highlights the direct relationship between the phenomenon of densification and the formalization of residential models. As previously discussed, we can consider a housing model that evolves in different phases.

The initial phase of development is characterized by the production of self-built housing, as evidenced by historical city maps and the analysis of residential properties constructed between the years 1920 and 1930. Through a process of simplification and concentration on the most prevalent models, it is evident that these constructions typically occupy a diminutive plot of less than 6m in width. A distinguishing feature is the setback from the newly constructed street, which is present in many cases but not always, thus creating space for a modest private front garden. Beyond the garden, there is a building that extends over a ground floor volume that can range between 40 and 70m². This is distributed in various ways, but usually with the kitchen and a minimal WC space (often as an exterior addition) oriented to the rear facade and connected to a septic tank that replaces the nonexistent sanitation network at that time¹⁶. These housing models are readily identifiable in municipal archives due to the prevalence of building

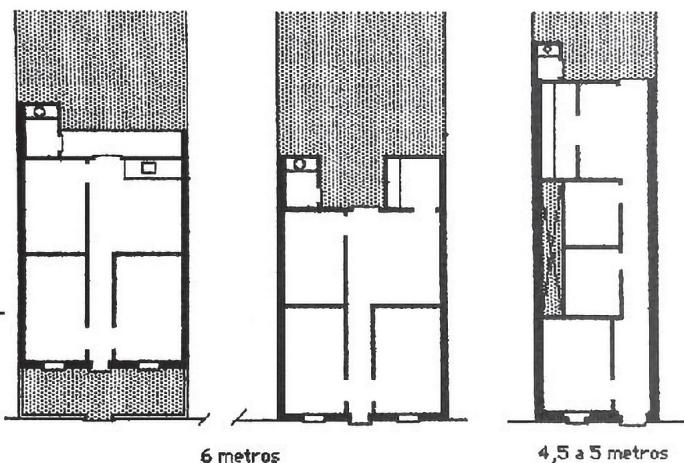


Fig. 3. Dominant building type (Source: J.L. Oyón Bañales, M. Guàrdia Bassols, M. Rosselló Nicolau, D. Hernández Falagán, J. Roger Gonçal, *La Revolució de l'habitatge a les perifèries obreres i populars: Nou Barris 1939-1980*, MUHBA - Ajuntament de Barcelona, Barcelona 2021, p. 43)

¹⁶ J. Busquets, *La urbanización marginal*, vol. II, Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, Barcelona 1999.

permits requested from municipalities, despite the irregular nature of urbanization during that period.

In a secondary phase, the simple original housing structure undergoes vertical expansion, albeit with the ground floor being retained in its initial state, which is typically renovated solely for the purpose of facilitating access to the newly constructed upper levels. These extensions, in general, do not exceed two or three additional stories, necessitating the establishment of an independent access to a newly constructed staircase. This process is not uncommon, as artisan houses in historic city centers (inheritors of the medieval configuration of cities) underwent a similar densification process, where independent access to a new staircase allowed the arrangement of new housing units above original workshops and domestic spaces. A fundamental circumstance that will facilitate these processes in peripheral areas is the approval, in July 1960, of the Horizontal Property Law. This legislation represented a significant development, as it was the first time that the organization of the urban population was regulated in Spain, leading to immediate consequences in the density of urban fabrics.

In the third phase, a substantial proportion of these self-built constructions is subsequently eliminated and replaced by new residential buildings, thereby exhausting the building possibilities defined by the urban ordinances that are already in place to regulate these territories. The necessity for vertical growth to achieve maximum profitability for small plots necessitates the demolition of existing buildings, which, although not necessarily technically precarious, were not designed to withstand the degree of utilization that has ultimately been achieved. This transition marks the disappearance of the original front courtyards, leading to a substantial reduction in the visual breadth of the urban landscape and the transformation of peripheral territories into densely developed spaces. The speculative nature of this final stage is expected to give rise to the emergence of builders and developers specializing in these processes. These entities aim to aggregate parcels to address construction challenges and explore more efficient building and typological models, effectively transcending the formal limitations imposed by the width of the original parcels¹⁷.

A review of residential typological models of densification processes at all stages reveals significant deficiencies, particularly with regard to the volumetric conditioning of the reduced width dimension of the plots.

¹⁷ M. Guàrdia et al., *Densificación, contribución de mejoras y boom de la propiedad en Nou Barris (Barcelona), 1950s-1970s: una aproximación relacional a las periferias obreras durante el franquismo*, in “Cuadernos de Investigación Urbanística”, 2022, 142, pp. 13-28.

The prevalence of single-orientation typologies with limited cross-ventilation, characterized by rooms ventilated through minimal surface patios, is a salient issue. The distribution of spaces often imposes constraints on the placement of elements, rendering them more dependent on the spatial constraints of the floor than on design strategies. Additionally, hallways and distribution spaces are frequently oversized due to geometric limitations. It is acknowledged that there has been an evolution in municipal ordinances related to ventilation, lighting, and hygienic conditions. In particular, concerning the latter, it is observed that prior to ordinances issued from the 1950s onwards (1958 in Barcelona), there was no specification mandating the inclusion of a bathroom with shower, sink, and toilet in the dwelling. These typologies were initially developed to address pressing housing demands, yet they ultimately exhibited a speculative character that prioritized quantity over quality.



Fig. 4. Typological examples of densification housing in Nou Barris (Source: Author's own production)

It is imperative to acknowledge that these processes of densification are not isolated phenomena; they coincide with proposals for substantial housing production through residential areas that expand into the periphery, leveraging available land between the established city and the emerging periphery¹⁸. It is also crucial to recognize that the number of houses produced by polygon operations did not exceed, despite initial perceptions, the number of houses developed within the densified ur-

¹⁸ M. Rosselló, *Two neighborhoods created in Barcelona in the 1950s: two models of a city*, in *Proceedings of the 13th International Conference on Urban History: reinterpreting cities*, ICUH, Helsinki 2016.

ban fabric. However, it is important to acknowledge the significant influence that public promotion exerted on the definition of housing models through the experimental character of the designs, both in terms of technical aspects and typological approaches, evident in numerous examples. Beyond the evident improvements introduced between the 1950s and 1970s – increased usable area of houses, improvements in sanitary facilities, modernization of the kitchen's energy source (evolving from the economical kitchen and coal to butane and city gas), incorporation of domestic equipment – the experimental nature of many examples had a significant influence on the definition models of housing. It is evident that, in addition to the improvements that were clearly evident between the 1950s and 1970s, such as an increase in the usable area of houses, improvements in sanitary facilities, and the modernization of the kitchen's energy source (evolving from the economical kitchen and coal to butane and city gas), there was also a significant contribution of residential models in the polygons. This contribution took the form of the normalization of a domestic model in which the idea of home comfort was incorporated into the collective imagination for the first time. This, in turn, had a tangential effect on the evolution of promotions specific to densification¹⁹.



Fig. 5. Typological examples of housing estates in Nou Barris (Source: Author's own production)

An interesting characteristic of housing estates was the experimental nature of many typological models and their willingness to incorporate the innovation of architectural proposals raised in the European context into

¹⁹ J.L. Oyón et al., *La suburbanización de la clase obrera*, cit.

local projects²⁰. In fact, it is convenient to contextualize all these block housing proposals within the influence of modern parameters of what had been considered the problem of minimal housing. The renowned International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM), spearheaded by the eminent architects of European modernity, dedicated a significant portion of their objectives to the study of minimal housing, rational construction methods, and the functional city. Their research into models of mass production of affordable housing evolved into a promotion of urban-scale rationalism, culminating in the formulation of the *Athens Charter*, a manifesto of the zoned and functional city that was dominated by Le Corbusier's thinking (drafted in 1933 aboard the Patris II, the vessel that served as the headquarters for CIAM IV, although it was published in 1942). The implications of this phenomenon on a global scale were significant, and its impact in Spain (as in other countries) resulted in an uncritical confidence in the capacity of mass residential production to solve the problems of housing scarcity. From the 1950s, the strategy of mass production of housing blocks in residential areas spread, mainly as a model of social housing for public promotion, with the public organism Obra Sindical del Hogar – *Union Work for Housing* (OSH) – as the protagonist²¹. This strategy became the prevailing approach in the process of urban densification, particularly in peripheral regions.

Examining the European context, it is evident that there have been instances of over-explicitness, as evidenced by historical records. A notable illustration of this phenomenon is the interest exhibited by Spanish architects in the residential complex constructed in Hansaviertel, Berlin, as part of the International Exhibition of Modern Architecture Interbau 1957. This exhibition took place in an area that had been destroyed by bombing during World War II. The exhibition proposed a reconstruction of the area with open residential blocks following the ordering criteria of the architect Otto Bartning, who invited important figures from contemporary architecture to execute the pieces. It can also be understood that the exhibition itself tried to contrast the communist planning of the giant boulevard of workers' housing Karl-Marx-Allee – then called Stalinallee – built a few years earlier in East Berlin, with a proposal of organic nature

²⁰ C. Díaz Gómez et al., *Los tipos edificatorios de los grupos de vivienda social del Área Metropolitana de Barcelona construidos entre los años 1950-1975*, in "ACE: architecture, city and environment", XVII 2023, 51.

²¹ G. Rubiol, *La problemática de las viviendas de la obra sindical del hogar de Barcelona y provincia*, in "RTS. Revista de Treball Social", 1975, 58, pp. 41-51.

and functionalist freedom. It is acknowledged that various Madrid-directed new towns drew inspiration from different pieces constructed for Interbau, yet a notable reference that has received minimal attention merits highlighting: the Barcelona housing estate of La Guineueta (in Nou Barris), which was constructed following the Social Urgency Plan applied in Barcelona from 1958 and concluded in 1963²². The project was designed by architect Julio Chinchilla Ballesta for the OSH, and the architect himself elucidated in the report his inspiration in Alvar Aalto's project in the Interbau. It should be noted that this is not the only reference: one of the blocks is volumetrically inspired by Günther Gottwald's piece and another in the unbuilt skyscraper in Berlin by Luciano Baldessari. The reference to Aalto is absolute, with the typological model being replicated in its entirety. The reference to Aalto is absolute, with the typological model being completely replicated. However, the built reality, given the technical limitations and subsequent occupation, deviates significantly from the originally proposed modern imaginary²³.

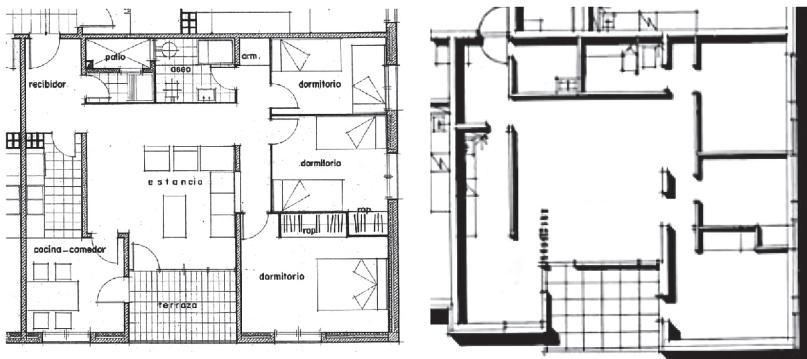


Fig. 6. La Guineueta by Julio Chinchilla -left- compared with Interbau by Alvar Aalto -right- (Source: Author's own production)

It is evident that a concomitant benefit of this period of significant construction was the integration of equipment that facilitated modern day living; household appliances, infrastructure, the universal provision of hot

²² J. Girbau Roura, *1957 Interbau-Barcelona: Base per a la innovació*, PhD Dissertation, Universitat Ramon Llull, Barcelona 2015.

²³ M. Rosselló, *El Polígono de Trinitat Nova en Barcelona. Primeros ensayos de modernidad en la vivienda social de los años cincuenta*, in *Proceedings of Congreso Internacional de la Asociación de Historiadores de la Arquitectura y del Urbanismo. Los años CIAM en España: la otra modernidad*, AHAU, Madrid 2017.

water and gas supply, the evolution of kitchen and storage designs, improvements in hygiene and comfort. The evolution of the house was multifaceted, from a technical, typological and habitability perspective, yet an enduring stereotype of women as care-givers and domestic workers was established²⁴. Advertising, as a means of disseminating the new home consumption model, systematically placed women as responsible for the kitchen space, appliances, but also the new comfort scenario, with the *bañaseo* (those small bathtubs with a seat that began to populate bathrooms) or the television set as the background for household activities.

It is also important to consider the deployment of urban technical networks in this revolution, albeit briefly. The increase in investment in public infrastructure, equipment, and public transportation occurred simultaneously with the phases of greatest growth in these new neighborhoods. This happened not without noting significant shortcomings and deficits compared to the rest of the city in terms of sanitation, supplies, or public transportation networks, which were the subject of struggles and neighborhood demands, as we will see later. This proliferation of supply networks led to a rapid transformation in lifestyles in these peripheral areas. It is noteworthy to recall the observation of Colin Ward, who explicitly highlighted the role of technical networks in housing revolutions, particularly in the context of the colonization of new peripheral territories²⁵. Ward placed significant emphasis on this revolution, emphasizing its parallel

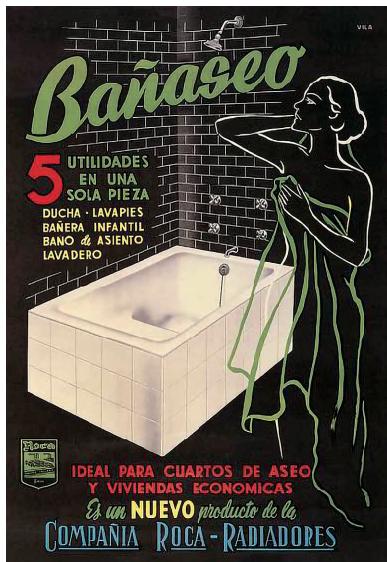


Fig. 7. Advertisement from Roca, 1950s (Source: J.L. Oyón Bañales, M. Guàrdia Bassols, M. Rosselló Nicolau, D. Hernández Falagán, J. Roger Gonçal, *La Revolució de l'habitatge a les perifèries obreres i populars: Nou Barris 1939-1980*, MUHBA - Ajuntament de Barcelona 2021, p. 232)

²⁴ M.D. García-Ramón et al., *Urban planning, gender and the use of public space in a peripheral neighborhood of Barcelona*, in "Cities", XXI, 2004, 3, pp. 215-223.

²⁵ D. Crouch, *Lived spaces of anarchy: Colin Ward's social anarchy in action*, in F. Ferretti, G. Barrera de la Torre, A. Ince, F. Toro (eds.), *Historical Geographies of Anarchism*, Routledge, London 2017, pp. 152-164.

with the revolution in home ownership, a topic that will be explored subsequently due to its centrality in shaping peripheral regions.

The homeownership revolution

The data presented in this case are of critical importance for the comprehension of the context, and it is a well-established fact that Spanish society is predominantly composed of homeowners, even in a percentage that exceeds that of most European countries. However, it should be noted that this circumstance has not always been the case; indeed, until the mid-1950s, the majority of the Spanish population resided in rental housing. Nevertheless, over the past fifty years or so, there has been a marked evolution towards a homeownership model²⁶. Indeed, it is estimated that around 75% of the Spanish population currently lives in a home that they own, while the remainder reside in rental housing without access to any form of social protection. This finding highlights a persistent deficit in the availability of affordable rental options for vulnerable population segments, a situation that can be attributed to the inconsistency and erratic nature of housing policies in Spain over the decades²⁷. The aforementioned policies can be categorized into two distinct approaches: the promotion of homeownership through the provision of officially protected housing, tax deductions, and subsidies for purchase, often with the parallel objective of sustaining the construction sector and, consequently, the broader economy.

Conversely, there has been a transition from interventionist policies to a more liberal approach in the rental market, which, in the late 20th century, resulted in the coexistence of old, frozen-price rentals with a new market offering of comparatively exorbitant rental prices²⁸. This has led to an unstable rental market, which has only recently experienced a modest recovery in recent years due to the current challenges associated with accessing homeownership. This situation does not offer either security for property owners or tenants.

²⁶ J.L. Oyón et al., *El franquismo y el triunfo de la vivienda en propiedad: las periferias obreras de Barcelona (1939-1975)*, in “QRU: Quaderns de recerca en urbanisme”, XI, 2021, pp. 155-170.

²⁷ D. H. Falagán, M. Rosselló, *A Brief History of Social Housing in Spain: Residential Architecture and Housing Policies in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, in “Histories”, IV, 2024, 3, pp. 326-345.

²⁸ D. H. Falagán and Josep Maria Montaner, *Housing in Barcelona: New Agents for New Policies*, in “Footprint”, XIII, 2019, 1, pp. 153-160.

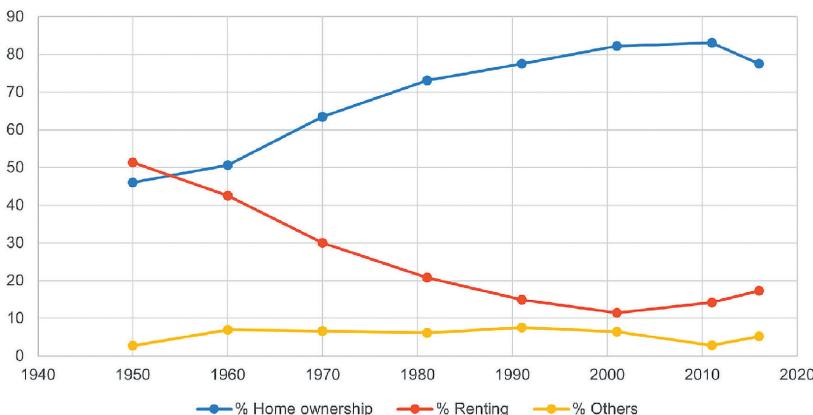


Fig. 8. Evolution of the Spanish Housing Market (Source: INE - Spanish Institute of Statistics - Author's own production)

In order to comprehend the circumstances, it is imperative to contemplate the progression of the Ley de Arrendamientos Urbanos – *Urban Lease Law* (LAU) –, the instrument through which the state has overseen the rental market since 1946, when it was established to impede the escalation of rental costs. Prior to this, there existed legislation on leases, which emerged in 1920 to regulate involuntary extensions, and whose subsequent amendments were codified in the 1964 legislation. The period between the formulation of these two laws (1946 and 1964) witnessed a notable shift in the property market. The price of new rentals escalated, exerting a negative impact on the rental market and leading to a decline in supply. This resulted in a transition from a society predominantly residing in rental housing to one increasingly becoming homeowners²⁹. This transition has been attributed to the implementation of Francoist policies, particularly those advocated by the Falangist minister José Luis Arrese, who espoused the notion that “no queremos una España de proletarios, sino de propietarios” (*we do not want a Spain of proletarians, but of property owners*). Arrese’s legislative actions, such as the LAU, and his broader political agenda, have been historically interpreted as a deliberate attempt to promote a conservative, structured, stable, and peaceful nuclear family model³⁰. However, it is important to note

²⁹ D. H. Falagán, *Innovación en vivienda asequible, Barcelona 2015-2018*, Ajuntament de Barcelona, Barcelona 2019.

³⁰ M. Guàrdia et al., *Working-class suburban housing, homeownership and urban social movements*

that the Italian Christian Democratic policies that were being replicated – “tutti proletari ma tutti proprietari” (*all proletarians but all property owners*) – suggest that the primary objective was to promote liberalizing economic policies³¹.

The result indicates a shift in the tenure model, demonstrating an unexpected pattern of territorial implantation: the increase in homeownership is predominantly observed in working-class peripheral neighborhoods, as evidenced by the example of Barcelona. Notably, the highest homeownership percentages coincide with the periphery of the city, and these percentages are even higher in peripheral population centers within the metropolitan area, as evidenced by data from the 1970s. This phenomenon is further substantiated by other data, including the observation that areas with the highest percentages of homeownership correspond to the administrative districts with the highest percentages of the working class, and in turn, with the highest percentages of immigrant populations. The data reveal a city with a centralized, affluent social class residing in rental properties, and a peripheral working class population owning homes. Consequently, the true protagonists of the homeownership revolution were the working class who migrated to the city peripheries, as the rental market in the urban centre was not financially viable for them.

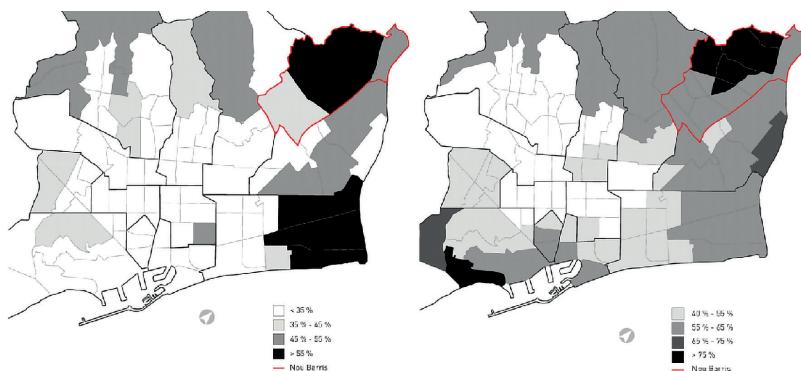


Fig. 9. Home ownership rates by neighbourhoods -left- and male and female workers' rates in industry, communication, services and transport -right-, Barcelona 1970 (Source: Author's own production)

31 during Francoism in Barcelona, 1939-1975, in “Planning Perspectives”, XXXVIII, 2023, 3, pp. 671-693.

³¹ B. Bonomo, *La proprietà della casa alle origini dell'Italia repubblicana: politica e legislazione, 1945-1950*, in “Italia contemporanea”, 2021, 295, pp. 222-252.

The transformation of agricultural territories into residential areas, coupled with the provision of social housing in residential developments, predominantly in the form of deferred or imperfect ownership, resulted in homeownership being concentrated in these peripheral regions, primarily intended for the working-class demographic.

Concurrently, the affluent population retained a substantial share of rental housing until the LAU underwent further modifications. This spatial segregation will be addressed in the subsequent revolution.

The revolution of urban social movements

The urban social movements that emerged during the last decades of the dictatorship in Spain were primarily motivated by struggles related to the right to housing or the quality of life in neighborhoods. The example of Barcelona reveals a very specific situation. The peripheries became the focus of many neighborhood associations, which later served as a training ground for the political youth of left-wing groups towards the end of the dictatorship³².

These social movements involved various actors, including religious groups, future political leaders and, above all, leaders of neighborhood activism. Throughout the 20th century, the episodes of struggle took different forms, such as demonstrations, strikes and various actions to advocate for decent living conditions. These movements developed chronologically, depending on the context. The most notable examples are the 1931 rent strike during the Republican period, a historic event in which 90,000 households in Barcelona stopped paying rent due to the economic difficulties of the crisis. The tram strike of 1951 foreshadowed a general strike, reflecting the difficult living conditions under Franco's rule. However, activism in the following decades was more localized in working-class neighborhoods on the periphery, initially focusing on decent living conditions and the legalization of property. Gradually, the objectives shifted to the need for services, public transport, urbanization of neighborhoods or facilities such as schools or medical centers. Thus, the focus of the protests shifted from the home to the neighborhood and from the city centre to the periphery³³.

³² A. Blanco-Romero, *The Power of Neighborhoods. Bottom-Up Governance and Urban Planning in a Working-Class District of Barcelona, Nou Barris*, in R.C. Lois-González, J.A. Rio Fernandes (eds.), *Urban Change in the Iberian Peninsula: A 2000–2030 Perspective*, Springer Nature Switzerland, Cham 2024, pp. 395–419.

³³ D. H. Falagán, C. Poza, *Conceptualizing temporalities of fight for right to housing in Barcelona*,



Fig. 10. Demands against real estate speculation (Source: <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/memoriademocratica/es/programa/programa-memoria-de-las-luchas-por-la-vivienda-en-barcelona-2021-2022/#cronograma>. Manel Armengol - Asamblea de Vecinos Vernerada Alta 1977. Housing struggles map in Barcelona, 2022)

Significant interventions aimed at improving public space, constructing facilities, or introducing public transportation were led by women, who were primarily responsible for caregiving tasks and more immediately experienced the need for local support in daily domestic life. Noteworthy incidents include the famous “47” bus kidnapping in Barcelona to demonstrate that buses could circulate in the neighborhoods near the Nou Barris mountain³⁴, and multiple protests also demanded traffic lights in the streets. It is notable that many of these demands, particularly those related to urban infrastructure, coincided with the significant presence of homeownership in the peripheral regions. Once housing needs were met, residents advocated for the incorporation of measures that would ensure urban and social consolidation within the neighborhood. A particularly noteworthy incident in the history of Nou Barris is the episode known as *Urbanize on Sundays*, a self-managed initiative where residents volunteered on Sundays to install pipes³⁵.

in *Proceedings of European Network for Housing Research Conference 2022*, 2022, pp. 151-2.

³⁴ R. Fernández Valentí, R. Lahuerta, *Manuel Vital para siempre*, in “L’Arxiu: butlletí de l’Arxiu Històric de Roquetes-Nou Barris”, 2010, 59, pp. 29-30.

³⁵ A. Gil, *Històries de Roquetes: Operación agua*, in “L’Arxiu: butlletí de l’Arxiu Històric de Roquetes-Nou Barris”, 2007, 51-52-53, pp. 22-3.

A review of these episodes of struggle reveals several noteworthy aspects. Firstly, the central role of women in these fights is highlighted, as evidenced by the occupation of the municipal institution Patronato Municipal de la Vivienda (*Municipal Housing Patronage of Barcelona*) on May 25, 1977, and the construction of community bonds, such as in the washhouses of the Governor's Houses (Verdum, Nou Barris), actions exclusively carried out by women. The challenges faced in accessing housing in tense areas, whether for rent or ownership, often serve as catalysts for mobilizations at the neighborhood level. These mobilizations frequently originate from individual struggles that are often silent and invisible. Actions are often linked to the absence of adequate planning, strategies, or public policies to address the growing demand for housing due to waves of immigration, which frequently result in the formation of informal construction settlements. A further salient point pertains to the significance of associative networks and self-organization in enhancing the dignity of self-built neighborhoods and in addressing collective deficiencies or needs. Cooperative self-managed housing and the squatting movement also play a crucial role in providing alternative housing access and in drawing attention to social discontent associated with housing difficulties³⁶.

A dispassionate examination of these phenomena reveals several noteworthy conclusions. Firstly, an analysis of the geographical distribution of struggles indicates an initial shift from central tension areas to the peripheries for the majority of the 20th century, as evidenced by the chronological unfolding of Barcelona's housing struggles. However, from the late 20th century and into the early 21st century, tensions concentrate again in central areas of the city. Secondly, an examination of the categories of struggles reveals a distinction. During the early decades of the 20th century, the majority of struggles were centered on acquiring housing through various mechanisms, including production, self-construction, cooperatives, and so on. However, as the century progressed, there was a notable shift towards struggles focused on obtaining infrastructure, transportation, urban improvements, and planning. A third period, initiated in the late 20th century and continuing into the 21st century, has been identified, during which concerns have shifted towards struggles against speculation and gentrification³⁷, as well as the improvement and reform of the residential environ-

³⁶ A. Colau, A. Alemany, *Vidas hipotecadas: de la burbuja inmobiliaria al derecho a la vivienda*, Cuadrilátero de libros, Barcelona 2012.

³⁷ S. Gainsforth, *Airbnb città merce: Storie di resistenza alla gentrificazione digitale*, DeriveApprodi, Roma 2019.

ment³⁸. These phenomena align with the hypothesis of David Madden and Peter Marcuse *In Defense of Housing: The Politics of Crisis*, which describes a shift from a phase of demands to a defensive phase in housing struggles³⁹.

The urban social movements that have emerged in recent years in peripheral areas have not only resulted in a particular style of urban development that has facilitated the physical construction and social fabric of neighborhoods, but also led to a process of population empowerment. This, in turn, has resulted in recognition by municipal authorities and the broader citizenry. These are all central values for the social construction of a city, though they are often considered peripherally.

Conclusions

The analysis of the case study indicates that the models of housing revolutions outlined in the introduction have been clearly observed in the data and sources of information utilized in this research. The transformation of the urban landscape, the renewal of typological models, the evolution of ownership patterns and the emergence of urban social movements are characteristics that respond, in a relational way, to the conditions of the new social scenario that emerged in the periphery of Barcelona.

While the experience in Barcelona is analogous to that in major European cities, the analysis conducted in this case reveals three frequently overlooked paradoxes.

- The urban growth resulting from the transformation of the peripheries was proportionally greater thanks to the densification of territories colonized spontaneously without planning than to the housing estates.
- The rise of home-ownership is located in a pioneering way in the peripheral areas as a result of the densified city and thanks to the conjuncture of the horizontal property legislation, with the bourgeois expansion being the stronghold of rental housing.
- These same peripheral areas have emerged as sites of identity, fostering neighborhood movements and urban struggles that demand quality urban conditions, including infrastructure, facilities and public services, akin to those found in the city centre.

³⁸ D. H. Falagán et al., *Mapa de la memoria de las luchas por la vivienda en Barcelona*, Ajuntament de Barcelona, Barcelona, 2023. Online version: <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/memoriademocratica/mapa/es/lluiteshabitatge>; accessed February 16, 2025.

³⁹ D.J. Madden, P. Marcuse, *En defensa de la vivienda*, Capitan Swing, Madrid 2018.

In conclusion, the aforementioned transformations can be interpreted through the metaphor of housing revolutions. The necessity for urban studies that analyze the transformation of urban morphology and the social evolution of the population in a relational way is demonstrated.

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