

Green Urbanism = Common sense urbanism

Zaida Muxí Martínez

Ph.D architect, Professor of Urbanism
Architecture School of Barcelona. (ETSAB – UPC)
C/ Verdager I Callis 2 3°1° 08003 Barcelona, Spain

phone: 34 933101655 – 34 639209426
e-mail: zaidamuxi@arquired.es



Abstract

Cities would like to have a unique and individual reflection in the “mirror” of globalisation, but in fact their reflections are indistinguishable the world over, an uncanny repetition of an unsustainable model, irrespective of place, race and economy, based on big names, marketing and “autistic” buildings which blot out the city’s fabric. Individual concerns, gender, climate and cultural references are irrelevancies, swallowed up in the whole. A genuinely “green urbanism” which could help us build a possible future, needs a radical shifting of perspective; finding new ways of thinking, rewarding inhabitants’ wishes, participative processes, long-term decisions and inclusive design-thinking. Learning about real green cities involves analysing the small, local experiences of cities and neighbourhoods. Knowledge thus gained will show us possible ways to proceed, not produce models to be replicated. Each city must find, in its intrinsic differences, its own path to follow.

1 Urban Renewal: a sustainable model or just a financial one?

Nowadays we can find self-denominated sustainable cities all around the world, cities that supposedly work on behalf of their citizens. But what we find in practice is a sequence of un-sustainable patterns: consumption, social segregation, racial, gender, or generational discrimination. Cities believe in the public image they have created through marketing, and there is an absence of any critical point of view. Paradoxically, in the era of communication, cities seem unable to realise that what they are doing is exactly the same as all the others.

In the treacherous mirror of globalisation, every city loves to be lied to about its beauty, its uniqueness and its financial power. Almost every city from Asia to America, from Europe to Africa is witnessing how new instantaneous ready-made neighbourhoods spring up from nothing. That is to say, they have created a vacuum by erasing all (or many of the) social- historical traces, as a place with no memory is better suited to financial investors. The only traces allowed to remain are those which can be manipulated to the investors’ advantage, to add a certain nostalgic glamour to the area.

Former industrial land, know as brownfields, are transformed in a flash. Until very recently, these urban spaces had been abandoned and overlooked, but in fact, before the arrival of so-called “rescuers of urban life”, these areas were still very alive; citizens, small factories, artisans and artists kept these areas ticking over. In practice, such artistic activity has often been exploited by the investors, to give such areas of veneer of quaint attraction. Needless is to say, what happens in the end is that the former inhabitants, including artists, are excluded from the new instantaneous green neighbourhood.

None of these urban renewal projects take into account what the inhabitants think. Sooner or later, such projects provoke reactions on the part of those who live there; sometimes voices are heard before construction even begins, but the process is hardly ever stopped, to listen to the citizens.

The formal pattern is similar everywhere and usually falls into one of two categories: the typical 19th century street-grid, or “towers in the green”. But the lack of life and activity mean these are only simulacra of the traditional or the modern urban model. Public space is supposedly returned to the city, whereas what often occurs is such space is privately owned and closely supervised. The formal characteristics of most of these urban renewal areas are the same: small sidewalks; green areas inside

private domain; few or no small shops at street level, commercial areas are concentrated in malls; buildings and streets are named after vanished spaces. New parks and green areas are designed and created but the objective is dubious: do they create a real and multi-social meeting place, or do they divide and segregate?



Figure 1: so called “public” parks sometimes feature “divisions” which end up segregating one class from another. Micaela Bastida Park, Puerto Madero, Buenos Aires and Diagonal Mar Park, Barcelona.

1.5 Case study: Can Ricart - Barcelona

New neighbourhoods are springing up quickly, in Paris and Barcelona, among other places, towering over the wastelands. Existing inhabitants are not taken into consideration and the urban model is a kind of neo-traditional European neighbourhood that introduced green elements, largely to appear politically-correct. Public and green spaces are often abducted inside the blocks, thus sealing off these supposedly open spaces from the public. Entry is not invited, rather dissuaded. This is a far cry from the traditional park, which may be easily crossed in all directions by everyone, whose boundaries are always within view, which is genuinely “open”. Nowadays, current designs often contradict the terms “open” and “public”.

In the 13^e arrondissement of Paris, near the Mitterrand National Public Library, a former industrial neighbourhood is being transformed. Buildings and traces of former inhabitation disappear with the exception of one or two structures which are kept for commercial or educational uses (eg. the university). Life is sucked out of the public spaces; a three dimensional living community is reduced to a one-dimensional surface. The function of streets is reduced to a minimum: to connect, and nothing else. A street is not necessarily perceived with the potential of becoming a living organism.

The only survivor in this “quartier” is “Le Frigo”, a former refrigerating-chamber building converted in 1983 into artists’ workshops. These artists resisted expulsion, were overlooked in the first renewal project and survived a fire in 1997, but now it appears they can stay. However, one never knows. Will the new neighbours accept their alternative way of life, and this “unsanitized” urban space in the midst of their new neighbourhood?



Figure 2: A New Neighbourhood in Paris

A similar story can be seen with our case study of Can Ricart in Barcelona. In the mid-90's, Barcelona took on an enormous challenge: to transform the city's former industrial area into a 21st Century production area called 22@, by means of a big urban renewal project. Poble Nou comprises mainly industrial buildings and the population is made up of mainly working-class people. On paper, the challenge of the project sounds very interesting: to upgrade the industrial fabric of the city, incorporating sustainable and new-technology models, as a response to the change in the production paradigm dating back to the end of 80's. The proposals were as follows: creating new working parameters for building and development; promoting mixed land uses; maintaining the presence of traditional non-polluting industries; adding new ones belonging to the new economy; incorporating housing and creating new public spaces.

The neighbourhood, Poble Nou, interpreted this new opportunity as a way of adding a new layer to the complexity of the city. But, unhappily, what really happened was that Poble Nou was seen as an empty land (*tabula rasa*), ignoring activities, heritage and inhabitants. Many industrial buildings were destroyed to allow the construction of generic curtain-wall buildings, new high standard housing, but no public housing or public buildings that the inhabitants had spent years waiting for. Both the young and old were driven out by economic market forces. The inhabitants, fed up with not being taken into consideration, reacted strongly to the proposal of destroying the last complex of the first industrial era of Barcelona: Can Ricart.

Can Ricart, a textile factory, was built in 1853, before Cerdà's Plan for Barcelona, and after many changes was still functioning (at the beginning of 2006 there were between 30 and 40 companies with almost 200 workers, but now not a single one remains), transformed into a cluster of different kinds of companies: from a candle factory using nineteenth century technology, to a high-tech company working for Ford production, and artist's workshops.

The official proposal for the site only maintained part of the main building and the trace of the others, and, of course, the clock tower and the chimney- not much land for such profitable symbols. In other words, they obtained an empty piece of valuable urban land to built generic glass boxes, the less they invest the more they earn.

The citizens' response was organized by the neighbourhood association²⁸ and an interdisciplinary group of professionals also joined them. The group's alternative proposal was based on historical and patrimonial research; economic viability; and an alternative architectural project. The proposal's aim was the construction of a real sustainable neighbourhood: supported by a participative process, taking buildings, socio-economic heritage and memory into account; and simultaneously adding new technologies and functions for new generations.

At the start of 2007 the process is still ongoing, the dialogue is difficult. Some things have been gained, not everything the citizens wanted, but at least 60% of the buildings will be salvaged. But time is against empty old buildings. Its permanence was only guaranteed for as long as there were activity and workers, but these are not longer.



Figure 3: Poble Nou district and 22@ (light blue) – Official proposal (middle) at the time of the alternative project for Can Ricart (Josep Maria Montaner, Zaida Muxí, Patricia Ribeiro, Christine Van Sluys)

The society of each historical needs to rethink and rebuild its history. We must rebuild our history in an open-minded way, including as many different points of view as possible. Barcelona is not merely the product of a 19th Century bourgeois society and that is why it's so important to recuperate working

²⁸ Through the *Plataforma salvem Can Ricart*

class memories. These memories and the spaces that hold them are indispensable for the construction of the cities of the future. A city that recognizes everybody could be the shelter and symbolic space for all kinds of inhabitants in equal conditions. Without this minimum departure point there is no sustainability.

1.6 New approaches for new challenges

The pressure on cities all over the world imposed by necessary growth, demands the rethinking of the mechanisms used in urban projects. It's not only a problem of shapes, but also a problem of form and hence ethic. A sustainable urban model, without spaces and mechanisms which take the inhabitant's desires and necessities into account, cannot exist. This means that we have to rethink the values we use to design urban spaces, thinking carefully about the non-desirable consequences of our designs.

We must think about comprehensive methods, including the voices that are usually not heard; those of newcomers, women, old people, young people and children. The city is not the same for every inhabitant, but any inhabitant must have the right to feel safe and happy living there.

There are many examples all over the world of cities searching for new ways of working on urban projects: Bogotá, the Ruhr area, and Barcelona:

Bogotá has bet for a better future by improving the living conditions of its poorest inhabitants. A network of almost a hundred libraries linking citizens of all classes is one of the central policies aimed to provide equal access for all to education and knowledge. There are four main libraries built in the frontier of the formal and informal city. These libraries, true public spaces, are open seven days a week to everyone. This policy, along with the efficient, new public transport, the projects on public spaces, the recovering of natural forest areas, are Bogotá's main bets for a better non-discriminatory future.

The Ruhr area in Germany is a good example of sustainable territorial recuperation, based on five principal policies: clean water recourses; the regeneration of the infrastructure of economic production; the building of housing units within existing urban areas; the reincorporation of former industrial buildings for new purposes; and finally, the regeneration of the natural landscape. The main issue here is that the entire project has been conceived with the inhabitants' needs at the forefront, not as an instrument of marketing and publicity. They have kept collective memories alive, those of both the factory owners as well as those of workers. The working class origins of the place have not been eradicated but rather exhibited.

Trinitat Nova is a seventies social housing neighbourhood, in Barcelona. The building materials used there were deficient. During the 90's public policies to rebuild the affected neighbourhoods were implemented. The neighbours' association decided that it was a good opportunity to participate in the process of creating an urban project of full regeneration for the future. They didn't only want houses; they wanted to be a fully integrated part of the city. They formed work groups to develop policies in four areas within a holistic environmental frame: economic, social, educational and urban. They were informed and supported by different expert groups and after 4 years working, they managed to define the tenets of an ecological neighbourhood. Their conclusion formed the basis for an urban project competition organized by the city council. This exemplary study case demonstrates that the citizen participation is possible and that the results are of such common sense as to be unquestionable.

In conclusion, there are different routes towards an inclusive urban design. I would like to advocate methods and approaches without pre-supposed starting points. We have to rethink the discourse on memory and heritage; we have to allow for places where forgotten stories (like those from women's point of view) can be rediscovered and exposed. Urban projects must incorporate a more personal perspective, based on experience. They shouldn't be based solely on hi-tech factors such GIS, but should consider individual concerns. This calls for an open, participative process. Gender issues have to be incorporated into the agenda of urban development

A sustainable city must never forget its roots, nor what makes it singular and unique. In others words, its natural and socio-cultural characteristics with all its inherent contradictions. It should seek to shelter everyone and to free itself from the restraints and homogeneity of global financial forces.

Sustainability is not only a question of resources but also of equity and opportunity for all.



Figure 4: Bogota Public transport – Trinitat Nova, Analysis plan, neighbours association.

Literature review

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