

Can Batlló

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Can Batlló is a 14-hectare former textile manufacturing complex which dates back to 1878. The complex was the backbone around which the urban structure of La Bordeta's neighbourhood is organized. In its most prosperous moment it was developed as an authentic manufacturer's town, home to more than 2000 workers. The business closed as a textile factory at the beginning of the 1960s, leaving space for the occupation of the warehouses and workshops by various small businesses, a transition that generated a particular industrial ecosystem. In 1976 Barcelona's General Metropolitan Plan responded to the demands of residents for public facilities and designated the land of Can Batlló as an area for public facilities and green spaces.

Up until the 1990s, the focus of urban transformation in Barcelona lay away from the Sants-Montjuïc District. In 2000, however, a significant transformation was planned through Gran Via, a major avenue that crosses Sants, connecting Barcelona with nearby l'Hospitalet. The objective was to develop a new economic district around the Gran Via, with the extension of the Fira de Barcelona exhibition centre and the construction of the so-called 'Ciutat de la Justícia' (an area housing the principal bodies of the Catalan justice and legal system). This urban development raised new expectations on the part of the owners of Can Batlló, who hoped to transform their plots into housing developments.

In 2002 more than 200 small industrial businesses were operating in the Can Batlló complex. In 2006 the City Council passed an urban redevelopment proposal which would conserve the manufacturing complex, provide for a green area of 4.7 hectares, and approve a significant development of housing stock, including 300 apartments dedicated to social housing. This plan did not satisfy the expectations of the multinational enterprise (Gaudir) that owned the land and which instead requested approval for the building of more extensive, high-rise apartments. The operation was subsequently suspended following the bursting of the housing bubble, leaving Can Batlló's lands and buildings as they had been, with some workshops still functioning inside the manufacturing complex.

Since 1975, the residents of Sants had - through several waves of mobilization, using various repertoires of collective action - been calling for a reclassification of Can Batlló as a space for green zones and public facilities. In 2009, several neighbours and social organizations launched a platform called *Recuperem Can Batlló: Can Batlló és per el barri* [Reclaiming Can Batlló: Can Batlló is for the neighbourhood]. Various types of social collectives and organizations, such as Comissió de Veïns de La Bordeta or Centre Social de Sants, joined this platform. They established a specific date, June 1st 2011, by which they wanted the public administration to have made a decision, and said that in the absence of a decision by that date they would occupy the complex to reclaim the space. June 1st 2011 was precisely the date on which a new conservative Mayor took office. The change of the City Council took place in a social climate of citizen mobilization and effervescence led by the *Indignados* movement. In this context, the new Mayor decided - having reached an agreement with the owner - to assign the management of part of the Can Batlló complex to the residents' platform. Specifically, Recuperem Can Batlló was granted the management of a 1500 m² building known as 'Bloc Onze'.

A year later, the platform Recuperem Can Batlló had renovated and transformed the Bloc Onze, creating a bar, an auditorium, a library and other spaces. Some of the resources that enabled the development of these spaces came from the City Council, but the autonomy of the management of the process was always maintained by the organization. The platform

Recuperem Can Batlló is organized around an assembly that carries out monthly meetings and distributes its work throughout various commissions.

We have a committee devoted to negotiation, which was the one that had (and still has) relations with the public administration, when we have to ask for things, when they give us more spaces, etc. In general we have many committees now (...) Those [committees] that are more related to the general operating of the space are the activities [committee], the bar, communication, design of the space – run by the people of LaCol –, economy, strategy, infrastructures, negotiation, administrative... Then there are other commissions that are projects which, as we have found new spaces, are made available to people that had the desire to do other things. There is a carpenter's open to the neighbourhood for people who need to do or fix something. Now, one of the latest committees is the beer workshop that is promoted by the bar. There is also the climbing wall upstairs, which is one of the first things that was built by everybody... (Can Batlló, Activist).

The platform also has three large projects focused on managing other spaces beyond Bloc Onze. These projects are oriented toward addressing various social challenges in the area and represent a clear faith in networking by neighbourhood associations as a response to such problems. These three large projects are: the housing cooperative La Borda, the self-managed school Arcàdia, and the agency for the promotion of a cooperative and solidarity-based economy Coopolis. Each project is in fact self-organized even though they maintain a relationship with the whole Can Batlló¹ initiative. Each of these projects also has a distinct, and autonomous, relationship with the public administration according to its magnitude, scope and needs. Can Batlló is, then, a social initiative where things are being achieved through a network of commissions and autonomous projects, each of which is horizontally managed according to a rationale of democratic cooperation.

The complementarity and the holistic and integrated ambition of these projects, developed in the ambit of a communitarian initiative makes Can Batlló highly original. The platform establishes a variety of objectives in areas such as culture, basic resources, housing, and education, among others; all exhibiting different kinds of open, empowering and participative formats (Subirats & García-Bernados, 2015). Within the initiative a cooperativist rationale and a communitarian approach are especially significant.

The activists involved with the platform are aware that the Bloc Onze is only a very small portion of the 14 hectares that constitute the whole complex, the rest of which is expected to be transformed through a new urban development plan. The platform aims to expand beyond what they currently manage, hoping to gain more space and to influence the new urban development plan.

There is a consciousness inside the assembly of the importance of not being distracted by the management of this space [Bloc Onze] because it is [only] 1,000m² out of 14 hectares. That is to say, the important thing is the overall plan. Then we have created several groups or committees with the awareness of them forming different pillars, where, for example, we can find the “work” [committee], which started up the Coopolis project. [Or for example] the education project with the Arcadia school – which is in progress – and we have the housing project [La Borda]. So, starting from the idea of not wanting to limit ourselves to the library and

little else, after a short period – at the end of our first year – the initial nucleus of people began to meet in order to start-up the housing project (LaCol, Cooperativist).

Agreement on the construction of a housing block using an alternative model - land use trust cooperative - has been reached between the Barcelona City Council, the LaCol cooperative and the Recuperem Can Batlló platform. The project is known as the La Borda housing cooperative and clearly underlines the integral and transversal approach taken by the platform in all its actions. This project aims to build more than 40 apartments through a land use transfer cooperative, which is a highly novel arrangement in Barcelona. The land on which the block will be built is a municipal plot that the City Council has agreed to lease to the cooperative for 75 years. The project will be partially funded by FIARE-COOP57, another cooperative hosted in Sants that works in the area of ethical banking.

The Coopolis project is a bottom-up plan inspired by democratic cooperativism which will aim to address the unemployment not only in the neighbourhood but also in the city as a whole from the specific prism of the solidarity-based economy. The project is designed to foster the cooperative economy by providing advising and training and by facilitating a 'living lab' of projects. It is being developed by the Association for Fostering Sant's Cooperative and Solidarity Economy, and has gained the institutional and financial support of the Barcelona City Council, as well as support from other bodies. It is a project that will have two dimensions. On the one hand, at the neighbourhood level it will try to find a solution to the high unemployment rates in the district. On the other hand, it has the city-wide aim of representing a place of reference for all with respect to social and solidarity-based economic activity.

The Coopolis project, along with the technical coordination provided by the Ciutat Invisible and La Col, is located in a 4000 m² ex-industrial building, constructed on different levels, with plans for public spaces, space for training activities, and 42 spaces to be rented out - with a maximum occupancy of three years - which are designed to facilitate the starting up of various initiatives. It also will provide space for industrial cooperatives as well as different consolidated projects of the social and solidarity-based economy that might further attract newly created initiatives. With respect to financing, the economic plan of Coopolis is based upon the City Council financing the building renovation and initially contributing to the costs of human resources. The project aims, however, to be financially autonomous and self-sustaining following the first five years of functioning. So, the project organizers advocate autonomy but nonetheless recognize the usefulness of collaboration with the City Council for the project's success. Nonetheless, they reject the traditional forms of management through public-private partnerships. They are reframing forms of governance and rethinking how new forms of collective management might be established.

One of the points of friction between the project presented and the municipal council is how and by who will the future [Coopolis] facility be run and managed. Its advocates want its direction to be mixed and broad: with the presence of the City Council, representatives of the social and cooperative economy, the Can Batlló Assembly, the high-schools and vocational training centers of the area, and community-based organizations. (Clara Blanchar, El País, 12 de abril de 2015).



What we have in front of us is a new type of economic promotion, but also [another type] of governance, both in its aims and in its forms (La Ciutat Invisible, Cooperativist).

These three projects beyond the Bloc Onze - Arcadia, La Borda and Coopolis - demonstrate that Can Batlló is an on-going initiative where different projects and activities are being fostered through leadership that is both autonomous and networked. These three projects remain, however, in early stages. So, let us focus on how the assembly of the Bloc Onze works. For several years this organization has used the fiscal umbrella of the local neighbourhood association but is currently in the process of creating its own legal identity. That means that, according to legal requirements, the organization will need to elect a board and a president. The assembly has already stated, however, that this will only be a formal procedure and that the organization will maintain its horizontal way of functioning, taking its decisions democratically through the assembly.

Regarding governance relations with the Barcelona City Council, the platform has accepted that issues related to the infrastructure of the spaces are addressed with the collaboration and guidance of the City Council's technical services and human and material resources. Thus, even though Can Batlló is conceived as an autonomous project providing services and activities beyond the state and the market, in some aspects they are willing to collaborate with the public administration in order to achieve their goals. As noted above, the platform is not the owner of the space but rather has the right to use it on the basis of an agreement with the City Council. Accordingly, the platform states that it is appropriate to take advantage of the City Council's resources for the refurbishment of the spaces.

A further issue is the management agreements that imply financial collaboration between the City Council and the platform; on this point, the platform's internal debates have been intense. A culture of preserving the autonomy of civil society organizations - something strongly rooted among many Sant's associations, as explained above - has been readily apparent with respect to Can Batlló. Until now the tendency to emphasize self-management has been maintained as a priority, always being chosen ahead of alternative options, such as co-management with the public administration. However, there remains debate on this issue and new arguments are developing that may change the platform's position. In this vein, the main issue is the need to promote professionalization with respect to some of the tasks carried out in Bloc Onze. During the first four years of the functioning of Bloc Onze as a space for socio-communitarian activities, volunteering has provided the basis for its daily functioning. Nevertheless, as the space and its activities have grown, some voices have argued for professionalization, an issue that has produced strong debate within the assembly.

The profile of activists that take part in the assembly, beyond the more active members of the neighbourhood movements, also include community based organizations and associations working in the area of culture, youth, schooling and architectural collectives. Further, there are also many local activists involved who are committed to social movements in general and who have a strong sense of belonging to a culture of mobilisation related to self-management, communism, libertarianism, and autonomy. Without doubt, the success of the initiative can be explained by the fact that the neighbourhood has a rich and diverse associative network, but also by the capacity of the initiative to bridge differences among this diversity through leadership practices that make cooperation possible.

When I explain Can Batlló in other places, I say that it is a lovely thing and you can do it too. But you can't do it in the same way; don't kid yourselves. In Sants, the squatters of Can Vies and the people of the Catholic Centre that is in front of it work together on some issues. In things like Can Batlló, people fighting for completely different things are capable of reaching an agreement and working together. I do not know if this happens in Poble Nou or Gracia. I mean, it is quite unique. And apart from this, there is a critical mass; and there are many cooperatives, squats, lots of youth clubs, boy-scouts, at all levels. The fact that makes a difference is that they are able to advance as one. In Can Batlló you can see this because there are many different ways of working that sometimes clash, but they have been collaborating for almost 5 years now and they manage to go even further, and you find the two structures: social centres, or more traditional associations, that are more pyramidal and have their ways of doing things, and it's difficult for them to understand the assemblies. But our ways of working must also be difficult for them. I mean, everybody has its own way of doing things and their own directions, but in the end everybody manages to give their best for a common goal. It is very clear: the older people from the more traditional associations are those that know how to navigate within the City Council and they know how to talk, who to call, and they have the time to do it because the rest of us we are not retired. But the younger people, we bring new ideas, energy, contacts with the press. I mean, everybody is capable of bringing something, and this doesn't happen everywhere (La Col, Cooperativist).

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We can state, therefore, that within the platform, old and new leaderships are combined. On the one hand, Can Batlló incorporates traditional experiences developed through the Centre Social de Sants and the Comissió de Veïns de La Bordeta. On the other hand, it also incorporates new forms of activism derived from the squatter movement and the cooperative movement. The fact that the taking over of the ex-manufacturing complex took place concurrently with the emergence of the *Indignados* movement produced an interesting mix of activism. That activist mix triggered a successful initiative that could be understood as a citizen response that was based on the emergence of new subjectivities that took place in the context of systemic crisis.

One of the challenges described by the activists interviewed relates to the ability to gain the support of those residents that are not directly linked to the associative movement. This is an especially important challenge when considered in the context of both the aim to promote citizen participation in a broad sense and the general objective of becoming a place that fosters neighbourly interaction. Some of the interviewees stated that, beyond those people engaged in specific collectives and organizations that involved in the space, it can be difficult to integrate residents into participation in the project. In this sense, despite the vitality of Sants' organizations, the activists that have promoted the initiative sometimes feel a degree of rejection on the basis of the project's perceived ideological affiliation.

We have to make ourselves better known outside the initiative within the neighbourhood. Everybody knows what Can Batlló is, but not everybody has been integrated into it. I mean normal neighbours and more traditional groups. For example, to make it so that the choir of Sant Medir would come and ask us for a place to rehearse, because sometimes it seems they are not quite comfortable with us. Also, sometimes people say that we are anarchist squatters despite the fact that politically we try to be careful – it is written in our statutes. Sometimes

during electoral campaigns we have found people wanting to use the spaces for [political] activities, but we don't want to be labelled a concrete [political] colour (Can Batlló, Activist).

One of the most interesting aspects of the leadership practices of the Can Batlló platform is how they have reframed the discourse of the common space. The platform was born through social networking and clearly frames Can Batlló as an alternative way to understand the city and the relationships between citizens and institutions (Subirats & García-Bernados, 2015). The management model developed in Can Batlló strives for shared decision making, evident in the desire for autonomy for the social initiative and in the valorisation of the public, or collective, which is implied in the platform's ways of making decisions and doing things. The platform holds 'the public' to go beyond the public administration, a position that is probably one of the most important discursive impacts of the initiative and challenges ideas that are deeply rooted in the Spanish collective imaginary. Instead, they hold 'the public' to be that which is recognised and defended by the community.

Nevertheless, the historical referents from which the initiative takes inspiration, and which drive socially innovative dynamics, provide a refutation to the notion that Can Batlló may be having too great an impact on the public sphere. This comparison with the worker education in the 20th century suggests that:

The 'Ateneus'² of 20th century – such as the Ateneu Enciclopèdic that became active again after the end of the dictatorship – And I think that the difference is the type of people that participated and their objective. It was a progressive, educative place, the Ateneu! And now, unfortunately, it is difficult to reach the whole population in many of the things that we, the social movement, do. Rather, much of the time they are for internal consumption (Can Batlló, Activist).

Regarding the transferability and systematisation of the experience gained at Can Batlló, it is important to note that the platform has done a worthwhile job of producing and spreading the narrative regarding its own initiative. Inside the platform there have been various initiatives oriented toward disseminating what it has done and what it has achieved. Examples of this include the video 'Com un gegant invisible' (2012), which frames the experience in the context of the broader transformation of the city, and the book 'Inventari de Can Batlló: teixint una història col·lectiva' (2014). These works have gathered a lot of material and documentation on the history of Can Batlló, drawing attention to the process of more than 30 years of the claims of residents over the space and to the efforts to promote a social and solidarity-based economy strongly rooted in the neighbourhood. This narrative produced by the platform reframes the claim over Can Batlló (and the socially innovative processes instituted there) as a more general critique on the way the city has been constructed and transformed over the past three decades.

Throughout its existence, the platform has established along the way a dense network of contacts with other projects and collectives, such as Flor de Maig in Poblenou, Ateneu La Base in Poble Sec, Ateneu Harmonia in Sant Andreu; Can Masdeu and Ateneu Popular de Nou Barris in Nou Barris; Espai Germanetes in l'Eixample, among others. It is also important to highlight the connection made with collectives of professionals working principally on urban issues, such as LaCol, Straddle or Raons Públiques.

They come to find us from other countries because it is a model that it is not usually seen. It's a model between a public social centre and an occupied social centre; we are in the middle because we are neither one thing nor the other. It's a self-managed centre, built by everybody, so I would say that, yes, it has had an impact that makes people from many places interested and want to know about us. It's true that this growth scares us a bit, because you worry that we don't have substance, that we're only a facade without content (Can Batlló, Activist).

References

Subirats, J., & García-Bernados, Á. (2015). *Innovacion social y políticas urbanas en España. Experiencias significativas en las grandes ciudades*. Barcelona: Icaria.

Notes

1 From here we will refer to 'Can Batlló' as the whole social initiative, which embeds different social projects.

2 Social and cultural centres.