

Revitalizing public spaces: Experiences from three renewed neighbourhoods

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Along the recent decades, public policies that affect the lived environment - ranging from public space to housing – have ceased to be closed decision making processes based solely on professional criteria to become open processes involving citizens (public decision making). These public, open and participatory processes require new methodologies for professionals and citizens to contribute with their knowledge and experience to jointly define the problems that affect the spaces they inhabit and to participate collaboratively to their solution.

In recent years, Barcelona's neighbourhoods have experienced changes that have led to the creation of new public spaces and the regeneration of existing ones. In some cases, neighbours had to adapt to these new urban spaces. The transformation of the city's physical structure necessarily involves a process of adaptation of the population to the new conditions determined by the built environment.

The analysis presented here is part of a research titled "PROHABIT: Analysis of the living environment to promote the implementation of the right to the city" financed by the RecerCaixa program (2015-2016). The main objective of the project is to analyse the impact that some of the recent urban transformations have had on the inhabitants for the purpose of understanding the processes of symbolization by which inhabitants give meaning to the space. Researchers in the field of community psychology and in architecture participate in this project. In fact, one of the main challenges of the project is to create a multidisciplinary framework to investigate the interrelations between inhabitants and the built environment.

The research encompasses three case studies, three neighbourhoods which have been submitted to different processes of urban reform: a neighbourhood with already consolidated changes in the urban structure (Trinitat Nova); one in the process of transformation (Vallcarca) and a third in which planned reforms have been finally discarded (Plus Ultra).

Specifically, this communication presents the results of one of the research objectives, which was to analyse the use of public spaces of these neighborhoods. The technique applied was non-participated observation. It was aimed to provide answers to the following questions: how are the spaces structured? (structural elements, boundaries), who are the users? (age, gender, individual vs. group, local vs. immigrants/tourists, etc.); what do they do? (walking, sitting/resting, playing, walking the dog, doing sport, etc.); where do they do these activities? (specific places within the observation area); and how do they interact with the spaces (recognition of boundaries, objects)? Between 5 and 6 spaces were observed in each neighborhood, in different days and hours (mornings, evenings and nights) during autumn. Observers registered their observation through descriptive narratives, mapping people activities, tracing people movements and taking some pictures and videos. These observations are being analyzed to identify the processes by which people endow with symbolic meaning the spaces they inhabit. With this purpose, the findings derived from the observations are being compared with the results obtained from other sources: interviews with inhabitants, participatory activities and documentary analysis. Also the role and participation of architects and environmental/community psychologists are discussed.

Key words: Urban renewal; public spaces; users' activities.