



The participatory production of temporary public spaces in times of crisis

The “Pla Buits” project in Barcelona

Paula Orduña-Giró and Sébastien Jacquot

Are participatory measures a viable solution when it comes to developing urban spaces in times of crisis? According to the right-of-centre city council that came to power in Barcelona in 2011, the answer is “yes”, as reflected in the roll-out of its “empty spaces plan”, or “Pla Buits”, whereby the city subsidises associations and other groups in exchange for developing municipally approved activities on vacant urban lots, until such time as the coffers are replenished – and better uses found for these public spaces.

How can new public spaces be created out of derelict urban spaces in times of austerity? The city of Barcelona – so often cited as a model for the development of public spaces that transform the urban landscape (Fleury 2004; Martí i Casanovas 2004) that a “Barcelona model” (Marshall 2000) has been defined – is now facing the challenges of urban planning at a time of economic crisis (Bourdin 2010). Following a change in political colour, with the arrival of a nationalist right-of-centre mayor in 2011 (after more than 30 years of socialist mayors), a new model for redeveloping public spaces has been trialled since 2012, based on the principle of temporary participatory management. In this article, we shall take a closer look at this new mechanism for the production and provisional management of public space, as implemented by the city government between October 2012 and April 2013.

Temporary urban planning: international experiments

The Pla Buits (“Buits Plan”¹) forms part of a new trend observed in various countries: the development of a temporary urbanism, as reflected, for example, in an experiment conducted in Glasgow in Scotland (“Stalled Spaces”, since 2010).² The city council, in conjunction with the social landlord (Glasgow Housing Association) responsible for managing the city’s extensive stock of former local-authority housing, allocates a budget to communities that temporarily organise activities in vacant spaces. This initiative is in turn inspired by other programmes aimed at bringing new dynamism to derelict spaces resulting from the stagnation of the real-estate market, such as the projects described in an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* titled “Efforts to turn empty lots to a glass half full”.³ Other practices, closely linked to urban agriculture or environmental education, are also being developed on a temporary basis in abandoned spaces with the support of municipal governments – as in London, for instance, with projects such as “Vacant Lot”, launched in 2006, or

¹ « *Buits* » in Catalan means “voids” or “empty spaces”. Here, it is also an acronym that stands for “*Buits Urbans amb Implicació Territorial i Social*”, or “Empty Urban Spaces with Territorial and Social Involvement” in English.

² See: www.glasgow.gov.uk/stalledspaces.

³ See: King, J. 2009. “Efforts to turn empty lots into a glass half full”, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 September. Accessed 7 May 2015, URL: www.sfgate.com/realestate/article/Efforts-to-turn-empty-lots-to-a-glass-half-full-3219440.php.

“Capital Growth”, whose initial goal was to create 2,012 new collective allotments before the end of 2012.

In these different cases, local authorities are seeking low-cost development solutions by temporarily turning over public spaces, free of charge, to bodies willing to manage them for non-profit uses, often in the context of a patronage-like partnership. This desire to find new ways of maintaining public spaces via private funds marks a turning point and heralds a move towards the liberalisation of empty spaces in the urban fabric, directly inspired by fundraising⁴ experiments for parks and gardens in the United States.⁵

Pla Buits: a plan that breaks with the Barcelona model?

Barcelona city council and its urbanistic model have evolved from a local political agenda, driven by a desire for redistribution at neighbourhood level in the 1980s, to a model focused on international renown and economic development, based on large-scale transformations in the 1990s (Martí i Casanovas 2004; Capel 2005; Casellas 2006). This model appears to have been called into question by the recent economic climate, which has had impacts on the design of public spaces. The current dearth of funding available seems to have led to changes in the way public spaces are produced. Indeed, compared with the stand-alone operations implemented previously, the Pla Buits adopts a very different approach: it invites outside organisations to find specific solutions for individual cases. At the centre of this plan, drawn up by Barcelona’s urban planning department (Hàbitat Urbà), is an open competition, launched between 1 November 2012 and 1 February 2013, for the opportunity to temporarily – for a period of between one and three years – manage one of 19 vacant urban lots in the public domain that were originally earmarked for housing, public amenities, streets or green spaces in the local area master plan (the Pla General Metropolità of 1976). These vacant lots are distributed evenly among the city’s 10 districts. While this distribution aims to be as egalitarian as possible in terms of location, the sizes of the lots are, by contrast, far from uniform, ranging from 100 m² (1,076 sq. ft) to 1,000 m² (10,760 sq. ft).

The city council makes these spaces available free of charge to groups and associations listed on the municipal register of non-profit citizen bodies (*Fitxer General d’Entitats Ciutadanes*), which then develop them for activities that are in the public interest or socially beneficial. The activities proposed must be temporary, be housed in non-permanent structures, and be of an educational, sporting, recreational, cultural or artistic nature.⁶ Those organisations whose projects are selected obtain a temporary licence to occupy their allocated space, which allows for private usage and for development that is reversible and funded by the organisation in question. This is a precarious means of developing urban public spaces, as these temporary rights of usufruct may be revoked at any time by the city council if it is deemed to be in the public interest to do so.

The panel’s selection: urban allotments dominate

An analysis of the results of the competition⁷ (Orduña-Giró 2013), which were made public in April 2013, reveals that the selection panel looked particularly favourably upon projects relating to urban agriculture: 10 of the 14 spaces ultimately made available are to be used for initiatives of this kind, essentially urban allotments. Not a single allotment project was rejected during the selection

⁴ This approach was used to finance the High Line in Manhattan, for example, which is maintained as a result of donations from members of the Friends of the High Line association.

⁵ According to the declarations made by the head architect of Hàbitat Urbà during the interview conducted in May 2013.

⁶ See the terms and conditions of the competition (in Catalan): http://w110.bcn.cat/HabitatUrba/Continguts/Documents/PlaBuits/BasesConcurs/Bases_Plabuits_definitives.pdf.

⁷ As of February 2013, some 34 projects had been submitted to Habitat Urbà.

process, while those projects not selected fell into an array of highly diverse categories (e.g. sports activities, the arts, educational activities, cooperation-based development projects, circus arts programmes).

Urban allotments offer logistical advantages and seem to be well suited to the interests of the city council: they require little in the way of roadways and represent savings for municipal maintenance departments. Furthermore, allotments are spaces that are closed off with residents' consent; as they remain available only to those users who contribute to their upkeep, the result is the regulated appropriation of a previously abandoned space.

Lastly, they chime with the city's ongoing (since 1997) desire to encourage urban agriculture through the "Xarxa d'Horts Urbans de Barcelona"⁸ ("Barcelona Urban Allotments Network"). By improving local quality of life and meeting a need for outdoor leisure activities, allotments boast both social and ecological qualities. Urban agriculture is perceived as an activity that has positive effects for those that practice it and which promotes environmental values associated with preserving and highlighting nature. In parallel, urban allotments would appear to be spaces that encourage intergenerational contact. Finally, in times of crisis characterised by high unemployment, urban agriculture potentially gives people something to do out of doors that can foster social contact.

The role of participation

This plan also raises the question of citizen participation in the development of public spaces in Barcelona. In response to the "participatory obligation" (Bacqué 2005), the Pla Buits seeks to reconcile the development of abandoned public spaces with certain demands expressed by citizens. Other public spaces had previously been ceded for collective use in the past, but in these cases the city council was responding to the requests of particular groups. With the Pla Buits, the implementation of a standardised framework has allowed the city council greater control over such temporary arrangements in order to establish an overall approach. It chooses the spaces to be made available with representatives from each of the districts, and a committee – two thirds of whose members are city councillors – then selects the activities and organisations it considers most appropriate.

In this respect, the city council plays an exclusively managerial role (Bacque 2005). It is not a question of asking residents what they want, but rather of encouraging residents to take action themselves. This form of participation practised and regulated by Barcelona city council combines managerial concerns with social and political objectives, by encouraging the development of social ties and "producing citizens" who are more responsible (Bacqué 2005). Organisations likely to participate include neighbourhood associations, which have traditionally been important stakeholders in the transformation of Spanish cities (Franquesa 2007) – indeed, the local dimension of project initiators was an important factor⁹ in the selection process: only one of the eight projects presented by residents' associations was rejected.

The analysis of the plan shows that the participatory aspect and the drafting of proposals for the spaces available in the competition were conditioned upon the existence of pre-existing claims, the number of nearby public spaces, the population density in the surrounding area, transformations previously undertaken in the neighbourhood, the history of social movements and informal

⁸ This municipal project, managed by the Institut Municipal de Parcs i Jardins (Municipal Institute for Parks and Gardens) and restricted to retirees over 65 who are registered in the district, was launched in 1997. In 2014, it comprised 14 operating allotments. Plots in these allotments are allocated by the drawing of lots. Users manage their own plots and must comply with the city council's predetermined regulations.

⁹ One of the criteria taken into account by the selection panel was local commitment, which gave neighbourhood organisations a better chance of being selected, but equally did not prevent organisations from elsewhere in the city from being chosen.

appropriations of space, and the extent to which certain associations have felt ignored or abandoned by the city council (Orduña-Giró 2013).

For example, in the case of a vacant lot on Carrer del Consell de Cent, various assets explain the consensual result obtained in the competition. Its urban context (in the neighbourhood known as the Nova Esquerra de l'Eixample) is characterised by a compact built environment served by streets with high levels of motor traffic, a very high population density, and a lack of amenities, making this abandoned space a particularly important site. Above all, before the competition, certain groups and organised residents were already highly mobilised, and a consensus existed for the development of a specific project, which was ultimately selected by the panel.

In other cases, such as a space on Carrer de la Farigola, the plan did not manage to integrate the previously existing demands, and illustrates – through the conflicts that it revealed or provoked – the stakes and challenges of urban regulation (Jacquot 2009). Carrer de la Farigola is a street located in a section of the city (Vallcarca i Penitents) that has undergone a long and complex urban transformation.¹⁰ Given the levels of discontent and distrust among residents towards the city council, it was difficult to find organisations willing to take on the project. Furthermore, the neighbourhood assembly¹¹ contested the decision to include the space in question in the plan by categorising it as “vacant”, when it was in fact “one of the emblematic public spaces of Vallcarca, where various neighbourhood activities have been developed over the long term”.¹² Here, it was the standardising nature of the competition that came under fire, as the procedure legitimises certain uses while seeking to suppress other practices that were already well established on certain abandoned sites. In the end, the Pla Buits selection panel did not choose a project for this space, and the existing groups continued to exercise their activities.

Conclusion

Pla Buits represents a change and perhaps a new era in the treatment of public spaces in Barcelona, linked to the reduction of public expenditure allocated to urban planning and development. Three areas of innovation can be identified here: first, the plan is adapted to the context of austerity, and so represents not just a response to a lack of economic resources but also a means of addressing the use of empty spaces while ensuring that the city's books balance. It is also an opportunity to test a new means of interaction between the city administration, third-sector organisations and residents. Finally, the Pla Buits is an attempt to formalise the temporary management of spaces with no fixed use: via the competition procedure, the city council retains control over the definition of uses and legitimate stakeholders. Instead of drawing up a strategic plan for the development of spaces available for collective use, the city authorities test the possibilities offered by this temporary leverage in the field of urban planning. This new approach could lead to urban planning rules designed for definitive uses being reconsidered and replaced by increased flexibility in favour of temporary uses of unoccupied spaces.

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¹⁰ Since 1953, the area has been affected by various urban renewal plans that have never been fully realised (Pla General Metropolità (PGM), 1976; Pla Especial de Reforma Interior (PERI) de Gràcia, 1985; Modificació puntual del Pla General Metropolità (MPGM), 2002; Pla de Millora Urbana (PMU), 2008).

¹¹ This assembly is a residents' group created to discuss issues affecting their local environment. Following the assembly-based 15-M (15 May 2011) protest movement, numerous neighbourhood assemblies have emerged.

¹² See (in Catalan): <https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B5UYTFRaOwnqaDJROTk2UzRZNVk/edit>.

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Paula Orduña-Giró is a geographer (Universitat de Barcelona) currently studying for a research master’s degree in urban planning at the Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya. She is the co-author, with Vicente Casals Costa, Myriam Morales Benito, Marta Andreu Espuña, Joan Àngel Sabaté Piñol and Irene Piquer Castro, of *Manuel Mujica Millán y el urbanismo novecentista en Cataluña, 1917-1927*, published in May 2011.

Sébastien Jacquot is a lecturer in geography at the Université Paris-1 Panthéon-Sorbonne. He is also a member of the research team EIREST (Équipe interdisciplinaire de recherches sur le tourisme – Interdisciplinary Team for Research into Tourism) and an associate researcher within the mixed research unit PRODIG (Pôle de recherche pour l’organisation et la diffusion de l’information géographique – Research Cluster for the Organisation and Dissemination of Geographical Information).

Further reading

Presentation of the Pla Buits (in Spanish): http://w110.bcn.cat/portal/site/HabitatUrba/menuitem.7014095af2202d613d303d30a2ef8a0c/?vgnextoid=4f0cc9152d1a7310VgnVCM10000072fea8c0RCRD&appInstanceIdName=default&lang=ca_ES.

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