

The Olympic Games as a tool for urban renewal: the experience of Barcelona'92 Olympic Village

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Introduction

As a geographer, I would like to address the subject mainly from a urban planning perspective. I will try to answer three basic questions about the dialogue between the city and the village:

- a) Which are the general ideas about the development of the city in late XXth century that are reflected in the conception of Barcelona's Olympic Village?
- b) Which were the planning principles and how where they developed?
- c) What kind of implementation process was followed and which was the participation of the different agents in it?

In order to answer these questions I will start by providing some background information about the city and the area in which the village was to be located. Then we will talk about the general planning principles and about its physical implementation. And finally I will address the question of management and financing.

Background

With a population of 4.2 million inhabitants Barcelona is the sixth metropolitan region of the European Union, just behind London, Paris, the Dutch Randstad, the Ruhr and Madrid. 1.6 of these inhabitants are in the municipality of Barcelona rest in the metropolitan area.

It is a very dense metropolis, highly concentrate in the space with a population of 2,300 inhabitants/km², well ahead of London, Athens or Rome.

With respect to Spain, Barcelona is to be considered the second capital of the country. Metropolitan Barcelona represents 11% of the Spanish population, 14% of the Gross Domestic Product, 21% of industrial employment. If we compare it to Madrid, we have that the municipality of Madrid has 2.9 million inhabitants for 1.6 of Barcelona (but the municipality of Madrid is 600 Km² and Barcelona a little bit less than 100). The metropolitan region of Madrid is 5 million and Barcelona 4.2.

The city and metropolitan area of Barcelona reached its present size during a period of very fast population growth in the 1960 and early 1970, in which practically doubled its size. This growth was similar to the one of many European cities in that period of fast rural-urban migration. But in Barcelona (and in Spain) took a rather chaotic form. In this period, as you know, Spain was ruled by an authoritarian political regime, that wasn't particularly kind on implementing its own planning regulations and investing in cities for the general well being of the population. The result, as I said, was a chaotic growth that severely damaged the urban core and created poor peripheral areas.

So, when local democracy was reinstured, some 20 years ago, there was a high pressure to intervene in the city in order to provide open spaces, services, facilities, infrastructures and so on. Barcelona started a very ambitious project of urban regeneration based in both rehabilitating central spaces and looking for the reequilibrium between centre and periphery. This was started in 1979 and developed for a number of years (Busquets, 1992).

But the nomination of the city as the site for 1992 Olympic Games permitted a radical change of scale of the intervention. Today, the organisation of big events is almost mandatory for cities that want to mobilise resources in order to keep in shape for international competition. It is to be said that in the case of Barcelona this is a hardly original strategy, since the city has used it from times in the last 100 years:

- 1888 Universal Exhibition
- 1929 Universal Exhibition
- 1952 Eucaristical Congress
- 1992 Olympic Games

The organisation of the Games permitted a complete change of scale of urban generation in Barcelona. If until then we had been speaking about squares, streets and gardens, after the Olympic nomination we were able to speak of new ring roads, seaports and Olympic Villages (Acebillo, 1990; Ferrer, 1994).

Planning principles

The first decision was that the Games were to be the games of the city and in the city. So, four areas were chosen inside the municipality of Barcelona to locate the four Olympic areas (Millet, 1990):

- Montjuïc, where the stadium, the sport palace and the swimming facilities were allocated
- Diagonal
- Vall d'Hebron
- Poble Nou, Olympic Village

What these allocations have in common is that they were in limits between the relatively well ordinated 19th century city and peripheral areas of the 1960 and 1970. Poble Nou, where the Olympic Village was to be located, was an old industrial area that appeared in the 19th century, concentrating both industrial sites and working class housing. It was one of the centres of the industrial revolution in Barcelona and in Spain. Even in the 1840 developed there a utopian community of followers of Etienne Cabet, that wanted to create some sort of phalanstere or utopian village following the ideas written by Cabet in *Voyage en Icare*. As we will see, this historical background had some echo in the operation of the Olympic Village.

When the intervention was decided, most industrial activities had already left the area, that gathered many marginal uses:

- industrial sites
- old fish market
- army barracks
- women jail
- beaches that had become dumping grounds for household rubbish and industrial waste

The project was developed by a team of architects and planners led by Oriol Bohigas, one of Barcelona's most influential planners (Martorell et al., 1992; Ribas Pira, 1992).

The starting point was that the Olympic Village was to be, after the Games, a normal area of the city perfectly integrated to it and with it. So, a normal neighbourhood, not an anomalous phenomenon, not a urban ghetto. From this starting point, the project developed three set of ideas relating:

- a) Infrastructure: the idea in this area was to create the basis for effectively opening to the seafront. This implied:
- Remotion of the coastal railway tracks (4 Km) that created a physical barrier between the city and the beaches
 - Placing underground other railway tracks that were a barrier between the rest of the city and Poblenou area
 - Rehabilitation of beaches
 - New highway underground in order to avoid the creation of a new barrier

This permitted to gain:

- 18 Ha. of beaches in a 4 km front
 - 50 Ha. of parks
- b) Morphology: continuity of urban pattern, streets, squares, blocks, following the 19th century grid ideated by Ildefons Cerdà, the engineer who planned the physical expansion of Barcelona in the 19th century and one of the fathers of contemporary planning.
- c) Uses: not only housing but as wide commercial areas, shops, offices, recreation and so on.

These ideas derive from a basic (and debatable) principle: it is possible to reconstruct the European city by attending to its traditional morphology, and therefore avoiding fragmentation and peripheral sprawl.

Physical planning

The implementation of these principles in physical terms, followed a scheme consisting of a series of 5 successive strips to the sea side:

- a) Beaches and Olympic Harbour. One kilometre of beaches in front of the Olympic Village, with a series of piers protecting the sand from the dominant stream that flows in East-West direction. The Olympic harbour with a capacity for 700 boats in the water and 300 ashore, with 75% of public space (bars, restaurants, commercial space,...).
- b) Seaport promenade. 30 meters wide pedestrian seafront promenade with cafes, restaurant and other facilities.
- c) Coastal activities. Two towers 100 meters high for hotels and offices and other minor buildings.
- d) Highway. Part of the city system of ring roads, with high traffic intensity (120,000 vehicles a day). The

problem here was how to implement this infrastructure without creating a new barrier, both physical and visual (as in many other cities: Genova, Buenos Aires, could be examples of this). So the expressway was placed underground (in gallery or in a trench) and a normal street was created at ground level for local traffic.

- e) Urban nucleus. The basic idea was to link the new residential area with the traditional morphology of the city. Some 2,000 housing units were build to host 15,000 athletes and 17,000 inhabitants. The new building were aggregated to form new blocks to the one designed in the 19th century by Ildefons Cerdà the engineer who planned the development of modern Barcelona. Some of them were integrated in superblocs permitting a complex mix of architectural typologies; single family housing, apartments, etc.
- f) There was finally a integrated system of parks both for the use of the communities living around and in the nearby neighbourhood.

Management and financing

Development already started before the official nomination of Barcelona for 1992 Summer Olympic Games (Martorell et al., 1991). In December 1986, a public firm was created in order to start the operations. The company, that took the name of VOSA (Vila Olímpica Societat Anònima), was 100% public but it had the possibility to act as a limited firm and incurring in debts independently of the municipal budget.

VOSA undertook in a two years period:

- Obtention of land (by expropriation)
- Demolition (some 200 firms and 157 housing units)
- Drainage system
- Coastal protection

The total investment for these operations was 80.000 millions of pesetas. In order to attract private capital to invest in the project, VOSA promoted in 1989 the creation of NISA (Nova Icària Societat Anònima, taking the name of the old utopian community), a development firm which shares were distributed as follows:

- 40% VOSA
- 40% real state developers
- 20% banks

The total private investment was around 101.000 millions of pesetas. In such a way the total amount of the Olympic Village operation amounted to 176.000 millions of pesetas (equivalent to some 200 km of highway in 1992 Spanish prices, i.e. some 22% of the whole Olympic investment (Brunet, 1993 and 1995).

The public/private partnership was absolutely instrumental for the success of the whole operation. But nevertheless it is to be pointed out that whereas most of the investment was private the design and the management of the operation was mostly public, following a pattern that was general in Barcelona 1992 Olympic Games. I think that this is to be pointed out today, when there is such a general discredit and mistrust about the efficiency of the public sector (Clusa, 1996).

The agreement in NISA implied nevertheless some important constraints (Moreno & Vázquez Montalbán, 1992; Martínez Alier, 1992; VV.AA., 1990). The commercial criteria ended with the research about new models of housing, imposing, a rather classic pattern. I think that this proved to be a mistake in a moment when, in Barcelona, the average of household size is consistently falling and new types of families are emerging.

The second constrain, and the most polemical one, was the price at which the apartments were be sold. It was the intention of the municipality that at least one part of them were sold below market price. But being VOSA in a minority position in NISA the apartments were sold between 20 millions of pesetas and 60 millions of pesetas well above the average price for sq./m in the rest of the city.

The counter argument from the municipality was:

- Did you really wanted a large unit of public housing in the centre of the city?
- Isn't it more important to have open the city to the sea and won an important surface beaches and open spaces, that are used by hundreds of thousands of people than the final destination of some apartments.

I will leave it here. The final conclusion is for you to draw out. I think that my opinion about the overall outcome of the process is clear.

Construction for the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games

Investment projected and initiated between 1986 and 1993	Accumulated values in current pesetas	Distribution
Road construction projects	343,804,115,303	35.9%
Ronda Litoral and Nus Trinitat	77,501,540,000	8.1%
Ronda de Dalt and Nus Llobregat	68,839,310,000	7.2%
Ronda de Mig	2,536,397,316	0.3%
Other projects of internal connections	5,848,662,684	1.7%
Computerised traffic control system	5,250,000,000	0.5%
Metropolitan connections	88,533,355,303	9.3%
Regional connections	51,791,600,000	5.4%
Barcelona Airport	27,756,250,000	2.9%
Parking (outside of Olympic areas)	5,747,000,000	0.6%
Construction at the Poble Nou Olympic Area	212,681,960,000	22.2%
Olympic Village Private development	100,980,000,000	10.6%
Public development in Poble Nou Area	75,203,560,627	7.8%
Other projects in Poble Nou	36,498,399,373	3.8%
Construction in other Olympic areas of Barcelona	117,973,650,000	12.3%
Montjuïc Area	58,138,020,000	6.1%
Vall d'Hebron Area	29,425,740,000	3.1%
Diagonal Area	30,409,890,000	3.2%
Other projects in Barcelona	182,449,775,658	19.1%
New western urban axis	7,979,130,000	0.8%
New eastern urban axis	16,395,880,000	1.7%
Remodelation of Old Port	6,890,000,000	0.7%
Service Galleries	10,071,325,658	1.1%
Other facilities	21,229,090,000	2.2%
Improvement of hotel facilities	119,884,350,000	12.5%
Projects in Olympic sub-sites	69,916,420,000	7.3%
Other sports infrastructure projects	29,804,169,039	3.1%
Other COOB'92 infrastructures	13,643,000,000	1.4%
Other Barcelona sports centres	1,107,169,039	0.1%
Other sports infrastructures	15,054,000,000	1.6%
Total	956,630,090,000	100.0%

Source: Brunet, 1993:210-211

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