

## HOW TEENS APPROPRIATE PUBLIC SPACE: ANOTHER VIEW OF URBAN RENEWAL IN BARCELONA

**Anna Ortiz Guitart**  
**Maria Prats Ferret**  
**Mireia Baylina Ferré**

Departamento de Geografía. Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona  
anna.ortiz@uab.es, maria.prats@uab.es, mireia.baylina@uab.es

The geographies of childhood and youth are evolving towards the goal of including the diversity of experiences and needs of those individuals who have traditionally been excluded from geographic studies because of their age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, or disability (Aitken, 1994, 2001; Holloway and Valentine, 2000; McKendrick, 2000; Ortiz, 2007; Prats, 2010; Rodó de Zárate, 2010). Numerous topics have been explored over the years, leaving an important legacy of research emphasizing capacity of boys, girls, and young people to take action in various aspects of the geographic realm (Mathews, 2003; Katz, 2006; Holloway, Brown and Pimlott-Wilson, 2011).

Many studies have been published on the relationship between youth and urban public space, emphasizing the importance of the streets as a place of autonomy, of constructing personal and collective identity (Gough and Franch, 2005) and friendships (Bunnell et al., 2011), or of confronting the controls imposed on young people by adults (Mattews, Taylor, Percy-Smith and Limb, 2000). Public space is unsupervised and offers the freedom to meet other people in ways that are not controlled by adults, or at least not to the same extent as they would be within the home environment. At the same time, this supposed freedom collides with the «adultification» of public space, or with the fact that urban public space is constructed by and for adults, and is assumed to be an adult public space (Driskell, Fox and Kudva, 2008). This assumption, added to the adult notion of young people as needing protection and/or as a potential threat, leads to the youth being excluded from public spaces, or at least not always being welcomed (Rodó, 2010). Nonetheless, the streets and public spaces in general have a fundamental role for youth as a place to learn and to construct their sense of self (Holloway, Hubbard, Jöns and Pimlott-Wilson, 2010).

Adolescents are situated somewhere between childhood and young adulthood. An adolescent can be a child, a youth, an adult, or in between any of these categories. It is a transitional

phase, necessary and confusing, during which each person continually debates between wanting to hold on to the protection received as a boy or girl and the desire to begin to exercise the rights that belong to adults. In addition to age, what perhaps best identify an adolescent is increased independence and the fact of being less monitored by adult family members, both at home and away from home (Weller, 2006). In our context, the passage from primary to secondary education at age 12 is a major step toward achieving greater autonomy. In many cases, it means a change of schools and a new education model that involves less supervision. Cahill (2000) advocates for the study of adolescence because it is a life-stage that encompasses the primary rites of passage for young people (first real responsibilities, first work experiences, first sexual experiences...) and the first independent, everyday uses of public space, unaccompanied by any adult. The same author created the concept of 'street literacy' or an interpretive framework that gives preference to informal, local knowledge that is based on personal experiences in a specific context, the urban public space. According to the author, the environment, and the street in particular, is a meaningful context in which to learn how to explore the relationships of young people with neighborhoods. In this context, adolescents have great knowledge of the protocols of their surroundings and acquire environmental skills that help them negotiate their neighborhoods, which they have learned from their experiences with fathers, mothers, other adults, and other young people (Cahill, 2000).

This article presents the ways that 14- and 15-year-old adolescents living in Barcelona's Besós-Maresme neighborhood carry on their daily lives, particularly how they use their time and space in their everyday surroundings. Given that their studies are their primary activity, taking place at their school and occupying the major part of their weekdays, we analyzed their activities and experiences outside of the school day and buildings. We asked ourselves what the neighborhood and the city offers for adolescents, what they utilize, and how. We considered the adolescents of Besós as a social group constructed by age but also by specific social relationships and by interactions with culture, politics, and institutional structures and policies at the time the study was undertaken.

We begin with a description of the study area, the Besós-Maresme neighborhood of Barcelona, and the methodology used, and then present the primary results of the study. Finally, we summarize the most important conclusions and suggest ideas for future research.

## **BESÓS-MARESME: A BARCELONA NEIGHBORHOOD**

The study area has a population of 24,403 and an area of 1.3 km<sup>2</sup>. The age structure of the population is close to the average for the city of Barcelona, with 12.5% of the population younger than 14 years and 18.3% older than 65 years. The significant foreign-born population (28.8%) is more than 10 percentage points higher than the city as a whole (18.1%) (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2010). The Besós-Maresme neighborhood is one of the poorest in Barcelona, according to the most recent data on family income per capita (Recio, 2008).

Located in the northeastern part of the city, in the District of Sant Martí, the hyphenated Besós-Maresme neighborhood is considered one statistical and administrative unit. Besós and Maresme are divided by the *Rambla Prim*, or Thin Boulevard, and have very different origins. Besós was built with public funds on agricultural land in the 1950s and 1960s, to address the need for housing as large numbers of people immigrated to Barcelona, primarily

from the south of Spain. During the early years, the lack of urban amenities, services, and facilities (schools, health care centers, green spaces, public transportation) and the poor quality of the construction materials used to build apartment buildings had a very negative influence on the neighborhood's quality of life. As in other neighborhoods around the periphery of Barcelona, improvements began to be made, slowly but surely, as a result of the neighbors' protests and demands. While Besós was constructed as a public initiative, Maresme was launched as a private initiative between 1954 and 1964, taking advantage of the great demand for immigrant housing. Apartments were built up on fields surrounding about a hundred small houses built in the 1920s (Alberch, 2000).

In recent decades, Besós-Maresme has undergone spectacular urban transformations. A great sporting event, the 1992 Summer Olympic Games, served as the excuse to transform part of the eastern boundary of the city with the creation of the *Vila Olímpica* (Olympic Village) neighborhood and the improvement of the public beaches. Another event, in this case cultural, was the 2004 *Fórum Universal de les Cultures* (Universal Forum of Cultures), which continued the transformation toward the east and created another new neighborhood, *Diagonal Mar* (Diagonal to the Sea). The entire area was revitalized. This new neighborhood is adjacent to Besós-Maresme, placing older apartment buildings next to skyscrapers and luxury hotels. The neighborhood has also incorporated the Diagonal Mar park into its landscape (designed by the architects Enric Miralles and Benedetta Tagliabue), the Diagonal Mar shopping center, and the public spaces of the Fórum, all built at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Nonetheless, and as Borja (2010) pointed out, while the construction of the Vila Olímpica did not cause any problems for its integration with the city or any negative social reaction, the Diagonal Mar and Fórum projects caused debates. They represented a break with the «democratic» urban renewal that had occurred up until that point and produced a mixture of social and functional spaces. Diagonal Mar was strongly criticized by neighborhood and professional groups because it was a project «based on isolated towers, with no continuity of construction» and with open spaces «open to nothing», of limited use to average citizens (Borja, 2010: 99). The Fórum was not a particularly successful event, although it did permit the construction of a large public space in a long-ignored part of the city. Borja describes the project as debatable, but considers it a «brave decision» to take advantage of the option to create an area with a new «centrality» (mostly high-status hotels and office buildings) in a marginal zone.

These initiatives – the neighborhood of Diagonal Mar and the Fórum – can only be considered «worth the trouble» when the new fabric has become integrated into the weave of the older, popular and industrial neighborhood of Besós-Maresme. And these areas that are so sociologically and urbanistically different can only become articulated when the urban quality of the Besós-Maresme neighborhood has improved substantially. In 2009, within the «Neighborhoods Law», Besós-Maresme was selected to receive government assistance from the 2008-2012 budget allocation for renovation of the worst living quarters and of public spaces, the installation of more public facilities, and the launch of social services programs and stimuli for commercial development.

In this urban context of great contrasts, the boys and girls of Besós-Maresme live their lives. The integration between the old neighborhood and new construction that urbanists consider essential for the success of these urban interventions emerges as a daily practice on

the part of the new generations. We would point out here that our research drew the neighborhood boundaries as they defined them; we did not adopt the administrative boundaries of the Besós-Maresme neighborhood.

## **A QUALITATIVE AND INCLUSIVE METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

The fieldwork was conducted in 2010 and 2011 in a public secondary school in the Besós-Maresme neighborhood of Barcelona with students aged 14 and 15 years. To encourage participation, approach the students using different lenses, and give them the opportunity to express themselves in different ways (written, oral, and visual), we used three distinct qualitative techniques: discussion groups, semi-structured interviews, and participative walks through the neighborhood. The first two techniques were used in classrooms provided by the school and the third took place outdoors in the Besós-Maresme neighborhood. The fieldwork took place during study weeks (non-instructional time) and our research activities were included as cultural activities in the school's programming. In addition to several exploratory visits in the neighborhood, we interviewed teachers, the presidents of the Besós and Maresme neighborhood associations, and a representative of the neighborhood civic center, all with the goal of better understanding the urban and social context of the neighborhood's adolescents.

## **APPROPRIATION AND DAILY USE OF PUBLIC SPACES**

The study of daily life and the relationship between people and the spaces where they live is a broad and cross-cutting topic that crosses many dimensions of time and space: education, family, friends, neighborhood, identity, sense of place, etc. The daily life of the adolescents in the spaces of the Besós-Maresme neighborhood of Barcelona may not be very different from that in other working-class neighborhoods of Barcelona or any other part of Spain. At the same time, we could say that it is a unique life experience because these everyday lives take place in a specific geographic context, characterized by recent major urbanistic transformations that generate new opportunities and new spaces.

The results of our fieldwork describe and analyze the neighborhood places that take on importance in the daily lives of adolescent boys and girls, contributing to their social inclusion and quality of life. These places are important because they are where daily activities occur and they are preferred or avoided for various reasons. This is the panorama we will attempt to outline in this section.

Before we review and analyze the spaces and locations identified in the neighborhood by the adolescents, it could be useful to highlight the marked gender differences observed in the type of daily activities that boys and girls participated in. One of the clear differences was interest and participation in sports. These activities, particularly soccer, emerged repeatedly in the discourse of both boys and girls. There was a certain consensus that sports and specifically soccer were predominantly masculine activities.

Of the preferred public spaces (or spaces used by the public), the most frequented and most appreciated by both boys and girls in the Besós-Maresme neighborhood and the Diagonal Mar shopping center, Diagonal Mar park, Fórum spaces, and the beach. Although the

Rambla Prim or Rambla del Poblenou boulevards were mentioned occasionally, the most often cited and used are the re-urbanized spaces with modern design and new construction in and around the neighborhood.

The overall adolescent assessment of the urbanistic changes in the neighborhood and surrounding area is positive; they have increased their sense of belonging to the neighborhood. They not only recognize that their daily surroundings have improved thanks to these changes, but also that their use of space and their opportunities have been expanded by these improvements and by the appearance of new spaces in and around the neighborhood. This is a positive effect that, while not a primary objective of the urban developers, is a good example of the active role that adolescents and young adults undoubtedly play in the processes of appropriation of their surroundings.

The other side of the coin consists of the spaces considered unfriendly or unpleasant (for environmental reasons, such as the water treatment facility) or spaces that they reject and avoid, even though they exist within the same urban frame. Talking about the neighborhood in general, we saw that they reported feeling comfortable everywhere precisely because «it's their neighborhood», they tended to agree on certain important exceptions. A clear example that came up in interviews as well as discussion groups is the area of *la Mina* (the Mine) as well as some narrow –or too open– streets that made them feel insecure. In these cases a clear gender difference was observed, as well as the ways adolescents have learned to negotiate their fears and their surroundings.

It seems important to point out how the significance attached to a public space can change based on the experiences that occur there and the emotions that are associated with them. We observed how a popular and preferred space became rejected after an attack occurred there, or if groups perceived as unfriendly or threatening appropriated the space. On the other hand, the girls felt «watched» in the public space. They are aware that their bodies are considered a sexual object and the discomfort, insecurity or fear this observation from afar causes them has a restrictive effect on their daily use of the space. This provides an obvious example of the extent to which patriarchal structure affects adolescents in the public space.

The cited examples show that despite the generally positive view of their neighborhood, its transformations by urban projects, and its public spaces, there is still room for improvement, for creating new spaces that can fill unmet needs and offer opportunities for certain groups that still have difficulty finding their place or sharing it with others. This is not only a task that remains to be done from the physical construction point of view, but also requires our attention to avoid slipping backwards, so that city spaces can be lived in a safe and healthy and especially egalitarian manner. All citizens have a right to their city, regardless of their age, sex or place of origin.

## **FINAL REFLECTIONS**

This article reflects the authors' desire to show the strength and persistence of focusing on the geographies of childhood and youth at the international level, contributing to this innovative focus with a case study from our context that complements and contrasts with the reality of countries that are more often studied.

The focus on age and the use of qualitative methods directly engages local informants who are often ignored, even in urbanism that takes citizens and social movements into consideration. Adolescents have opinions about their surroundings and make their own demands. Research that involves them also brings into view an interesting conceptual approach, the definition of «their» neighborhood, which has no reason to coincide with administrative boundaries or with the meaning(s) assigned to the neighborhood by the adults of the same community.

The group of adolescents we studied live in a traditionally peripheral neighborhood that in recent years has undergone major urbanistic changes that have produced important physical and social changes. Despite the conflicts that arose at first, these changes have improved the quality of life for these adolescents, the environmental quality of Besós-Maresme, and the feeling of belonging to the neighborhood and to the city. Public space is central to the daily life of adolescents, and during this vital life-stage constitutes a refuge for their interactions and activities.

The interests and activities of adolescents during their free time coincided with the observations of previous studies: they all showed a clear preference for spacious new construction and modern design, a sharp contrast with the older, densely placed buildings where they live. They also prefer these spaces for what they can do there, and because their families and other neighbors are less likely to frequent them. This gives them peace and privacy that they do not find in their immediate surroundings. Although age is to a large extent a homogenizing factor in the urban life of adolescents, the specific experience of public space is not neutral with respect to gender. Girls, per and because of their assigned roles, reveal particular interactions with places that become translated into a more restricted use of the public space.

Public space is a product of the society, and therefore of the adolescents who live there. Their daily use and appropriation of new public spaces are an exercise in citizenship as they express, negotiate, and represent their identity. Therefore, their experience and assessment is very important, both for the evaluation of completed urbanistic projects and for the designs of the future.