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URBAN ZERO POINTS – RE-POLITICIZING EL RAVAL

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Abstract

The paper outlines the post-political urban condition under the influence of global economic changes and neoliberal politics. In this respect, indefinite vacant areas constitute potential spaces of re-politicization in the contemporary urban fabric. They are interpreted as zero points, inherently undefined and open to various ways of appropriation. The hypothesis of zero points is further investigated with the aid of the radical urban renewal project in the Raval neighbourhood of Barcelona. It is argued that the public areas introduced during restructuring advanced Raval's substantial transformations physically, economically and socially – yet, originating new challenges and conflicts at the same time. Raval's development is the local manifestation of a global process and raised issues the neighbourhood is still struggling with, such as immigration and gentrification. It exemplifies the challenges we are facing in dense urban fabrics. Recent initiatives of soft activism in the neighbourhood, self-organised urban movements, encourage citizens to re-appropriate the public arena and assist re-politicization. In the case of Raval urban zero points act as both, generators of diversity changing the social tissue and mediators in overcoming fragmentation and strengthening the political sphere.

Economic transformations and the post-political

The micro-macro link

In the 1970s and 80s, the economic crisis of fordism facilitated the internationalisation of production processes and labour markets as well as substantial changes in government policies from Keynesian Welfare State to Neoliberal Politics. With the rise of the post-fordist era and the establishment of a powerful global financial capital, the market emancipated itself from Nation States. The economic change from industrial production to services and finance was accompanied by a substantial shift from regional to urban areas. Individual cities became significant partners for economic development and started reinventing themselves with a distinct focus on general market needs rather than immediate social issues: the *Entrepreneurial City*.

Many scholars have described the diverse effects of global economic transformations on local and regional administration and development (e.g. Sassen 1992; Smith 2002); effects that have proven their ability to assert themselves in the scope of various urban restructuring plans. Globalising economic production shows responsible for new urban fabrics that spatialise social changes such as fragmentation and influence the demographic structure at the same time.

Striving for competitiveness and economic success on a global level not only affects urban planning objectives, it also fuels the fear of the exact opposite: internal social rupture and decline of the local economy. Poor neighbourhoods are stigmatised as degenerated in order to enforce the duality between deprived areas and economic expansion. “The poor neighbourhood is Neoliberalism’s Other” (Baeten 2007, 46). The negative image is used to legitimise market-driven politics and ease their way into planning strategies. Gaining a strong market position is presented as the only possible answer to economic instability. As a result major urban development projects (UDP) were drawn up in many cities over the past two decades to physically, economically and socially restructure cities and attract private capital.

The changing local environment is the consequence of a global economic network. At the same time, local transformations in a European context have been put back on the transnational agenda with the European Union developing specific UDP strategies as well as providing funding for major development projects, e.g. through the EU Cohesion Fund. Hence, we can describe the relationship between local and transnational levels as multilayered and two-directional, an ambivalent micro-macro link.

The politics-political contradiction

If we understand politics as ideologies and strategies of social ordering implemented by the State or other authorities, its very nature of aiming for a homogenous governing process becomes apparent. The basic concept of contemporary democratic politics lies in organising human coexistence, hence, efficient decision-making and consensus-driven governmentality that

benefit one or several groups play a pivotal role. Based on this scope of responsibilities, politics is not concerning itself with assessing and responding to societal needs as a whole. The underlying pressure of consensus and rationality contradicts the growing heterogeneity of a global society.

The political on the other hand refers to the truly natural attribute of every individual to enunciate agreement or disagreement, to act in approval or opposition. When Aristotle referred to the human being as *zoon politikon* he described one of the key characteristics of mankind: the urge to participate in social activity, the need to form groups. While the political is a non-exclusive realm of negotiation and interaction, administrative politics implicates the hierarchic structure of governmental democracy. Politics is a managerial system based on reason and efficiency and therefore, automatically contrasts the appearance of the political. The political on the other hand, provides space for and is based on plurality, a pluralistic discourse that structures of politics tend to suffocate. Politics are result-focused while the political is more concerned with the process.

Neoliberal politics and de-politicization

Considering the micro-macro link and the politics-political contradiction as outlined above, it becomes comprehensible why neoliberal politics have encouraged de-politicization, not only in civil society but also within the managerial structure itself. We have experienced a decisive paradigm shift in urban politics and planning from production and distribution approaches to progressive economic expansion policies. Cities have turned into places of global production and are facing unfamiliar entrepreneurial issues in striving for competitiveness. Local governments are in need of new methods of managing and funding large UDPs and hence, are allying with private companies. These public-private-partnerships are taking a strong lead in the process of urban restructuring which benefits the economic feasibility of renewal plans but also undermines democratic policies. Being rendered an indispensable stakeholder through budgetary necessities, private capital gains the power to directly influence the planning process and its outcomes, thus eluding political negotiation.

Neoliberal politics opens the urban context to transnational influences while neglecting the subsequent issue of increased heterogeneity and its consequences. State responsibilities of social reproduction have been passed on to superior governing bodies or non-governmental organisations. We have seen a substantial growth of the *Third Sector* (e.g. NGOs) offering social services to a broader public while, if anything, the Nation State's influence in that respect is a concern with social order and control, trying to prevent whatever is considered anti-social behaviour and attempting to create a homogeneous social structure instead. Neoliberal politics prioritise directed consensual strategies over political discourse and encourage the rise and propagation of a *zero-tolerance* ideology (Smith 2002; Smith 2007). This results in a paralysed political sphere, a post-political urban condition that becomes evident in a

“public arena evacuated from radical dissent, critique and fundamental conflict” (Swyngedouw 2007, 65). Or as Chantal Mouffe states “Too much emphasis on consensus and the refusal of confrontation lead to apathy and disaffection with political participation.” (Mouffe 2000, 16)

Spaces of re-politicization

Getting political again?!

Why do we need an urban re-politicization? Following Aristotle’s thoughts, we can describe human beings as truly political as this matches our natural capabilities. As Mary Nichols points out, in her understanding of Aristotle, humans “can fully exercise their capacity for reason and speech only by communicating with others about what is advantageous and just.” (Nichols 1992, 13). That is to say, the interactive nature of the political is not only addressing but also enhancing “humanity’s highest natural capacity” (Nichols 1992, 13). Establishing a proper political discourse, therefore presents itself as a necessity not an option.

Furthermore, the modification and increased densification of the urban fabric in reaction to a globalising economy and the persistent trend of urbanisation not only demands new building typologies, but also asks for new social concepts for managing density. The quantification and verticalisation of building mass, spatial programs and people represents a social change and raises questions with regards to the quality of our living environment. Providing an arena for political mobilisation and citizen empowerment must be a priority in an ever-densifying and –diversifying urban context.

As a suitable place for re-politicization we can imagine nothing but the city. Urban agglomerations have long been and still are the epitome of societal concentration where different aspects of human cohabitation overlap, but not necessarily interact. This is what we need to address! With an increasing variety of cultural backgrounds and social strata the sense of belonging is challenged. It is here that establishing a political sphere is not only in strong demand but it is also provoked and nurtured by varying contentious situations. The city centralises social and political aspects, it has to be able to take them in, represent them and convert them into further societal development. The urban context has developed into a global economic player, now it needs to regain its importance in the process of social reproduction and political mobilisation. Hence, the city requires a collective space where interaction can take place and is encouraged.

Vacancy as valency

Defining the city as the realm of re-politicization requires us to be more specific about distinguishing between its physical and non-physical settings. Physical environment is the structural basis, the three-dimensional frame of the socio-political sphere. However, analysing the political potential in a dense urban context puts the emphasis not on the production of *architecture*, but rather the production of *space*. If we define space as a social product created in a negotiation process amongst various actors, we can determine its statutory elements:

physical setting and social practice. The resulting non-physical space has characteristics that both reflect and constitute society, it represents the present and establishes the future. Rethinking political discourse, thus requires us to look at social space in the urban context.

The contemporary city seems to be incapable of facing the challenges that derive from an overlapping of micro-level (body space) and macro-level (global networking), a simultaneity and plurality of social aspects. Infrastructural problems, fragmented urban spaces, segregation and individualisation are the visible consequences. Public areas capable of mediating and balancing are limited and regulated. In view of increasing densification on the grounds of lot-based urban planning, we can expect to see these open zones further diminished. The physical settings of the public sphere are changing, and so are the functions. Growing heterogeneity and complexity pose a higher potential for conflicts and, therefore, seek possibilities for negotiation. The city must provide a framework for free speech and interaction.

It requires new, vacant areas, in-between spaces and niches that act as mediating zones and constitute a frame for self-determined ways of communicating and acting. The more undefined these areas, the more possibilities there are for interaction between various actors. Indeterminacy, in this respect, is seen as a potential and prerequisite for the production of social space. Hence, the city needs points of complete indeterminacy: *urban zero points* – that are simultaneously neutrality and origin. The potential of these vacancies lies in the presentation of an indifference that not only enables, but demands initiative and interaction. As individuals or groups appropriate the emptiness, indifference turns into a complex space of communication and action. Urban zero points evoke the production and reproduction of space, places of spatialisation (origin) without being part of the context themselves (neutrality). They provide a permeability that leads to a densification of various social and political aspects. Their undefined nature allows shifts in the urban structure, new divisions and positionings. As a result, the urban system is mobile, adaptable and porous in the positive sense.

The need for individual freedom in emptiness as a precondition for the production of socially dense and politically active space appears to be a paradox at first, but demonstrates its logic in the experiences of the ambitious urban restructuring project of El Raval, Barcelona.

El Raval – a case study

Radical urban surgery

El Raval, situated immediately to the west of the Barri Gòtic, or Gothic Quarter, was once the hub of industrialisation in Barcelona. In a very confined space it hosted different industries and was tightly packed with multi-storey, poorly appointed blocks of flats for their workers. Prostitution was also rife, with the red-light district spreading in the southern area closest to the port. When the city walls were opened and Barcelona began to spread in the 19th century the industrial importance of El Raval began to wane

and the district suffered increasing neglect - ignored by home-owners and the City Council, avoided by Barcelonese and tourists. By the mid-20th century, the dark narrow streets had become a shabby housing area for workers and immigrants from the south of Spain, amidst petty crime, drugs and prostitution – a social fringe district in a central location.

After the end of the Franco dictatorship and the restoration of democracy in the 1970s, the city's new socialist government concentrated their efforts on Raval and on improving the social environment. The *Plan Especial de Reforma Interior* (PERI) planning scheme initiated extensive inner-city reforms. In addition to refurbishing housing blocks and building new public facilities, Oriol Bohigas, head of the Urban Planning Department at the time, placed the emphasis on micro-interventions – inexpensive projects that could be carried out quickly in order to bolster public space. A key factor in this respect was the concept of *plazas duras*: obsolete building fabric demolished and replaced by small public squares with hard surfaces. These light-flooded, airy spaces were positioned in the densely packed setting similar to a sponge. Hence, the scheme was known as *Esponjamiento* (esponja = sponge).

Plazas duras were characterised by a variety of stone or concrete materials and surfaces, little greenery, easy and inexpensive to maintain. Their aim was to serve as meeting-places and spaces of interaction designed to combat spatial and social segregation – suitable for all manner of uses, accessible day and night, rarely zoned or fenced off. The existing adjacent building fabric formed a framework to stage the emptiness. Everyone became an actor when crossing these open squares (Paravicini 2002, 26) – an even distribution of rights and responsibilities. The *plazas duras* were designed in reaction to the dawn of democracy and the great need for an absolute public space. They posed an opportunity for improving the social environment *from the bottom up*, that is to say, by citizens themselves.

At the end of the 1980s, ahead of the Olympic Games, planning guidelines were altered to address economic issues. Though the focus was still on creating public spaces, restructuring then happened within the scope of large-scale planning combined with new public facilities, e.g. the Plaça dels Àngels and the Rambla del Raval axis. The aim was to respond to the recession by boosting the culture and tourism industry and increasing private investment. On this account the project company Promocio Ciutat Vella S.A. (PROCIVESA, followed by FOCIVESA) was founded, a public-private partnership consisting of administrative bodies, neighbourhood associations and private capital. "It was some kind of economic operation: we are going to put very much money in the beginning but we are going to get it back in a short period because this part of the city is going to be a normal part of the city" (Gual / Santos 2011). Initially under the mantle of public service, the redevelopment of the city increasingly followed the market-oriented logic of the post-industrial service economy, bolstered by global economic trends and neoliberal politics. With the aid of the empty spaces introduced and by *airing* the narrow labyrinth of the city,

local authorities tried to enhance and normalise the district, to probe the monosocial milieu of poverty, drugs, prostitution and crime.

A new social tissue

As a consequence of breaking up the dense structure and improving residential settings public institutions with a focus on research and culture relocated to El Raval. As intended by urban planners, the neighbourhood experienced an increase in touristic interest and the development of the hitherto practically non-existent real estate market. However, the intervention of empty areas also enhanced an informal development - the notable increase in inhabitants of many different origins and social strata since the mid-1990s. Driven by global immigration movements, Raval experienced an influx that exceeds average immigration levels in Barcelona by far, thus confronting the neighbourhood with new challenges. Opening up the density also opened up the boundaries between different social strata or neighbourhoods. There are currently three main social groups in El Raval: the original working-class inhabitants, immigrants from more than seventy countries that make up around one half of the population, and a small, mostly Spanish middle class with higher education and/or artistic ambitions. Due to the great diversity of the social structure, only a rough classification to one of these three categories is possible. The groups are in themselves heterogeneous and thus hard to subdivide (Subirats / Rius 2006, 36).

The importance of public areas for social and political change in the district was due to the fact that they mostly had no clear-cut functions or buildings allocated to them, that is to say, there was no ownership structure nor any rules regarding use. A public space “rhetorically defined as open to all, and therefore as the place of encounter and of the production of collective culture” (Balibrea 2004, 211). The urban planners conceived the majority of the free spaces as open squares linked up with the city’s system of paths, not as semi-public inner courtyards. During the first stage of planning, this was founded in the immediate surroundings by the guiding idea of decentralisation and social stabilisation, but later came under the mantle of control and municipal representation. Notwithstanding the contrary background of planning, both stages prevented a retreat into private areas and encouraged public interaction.

The physical and metaphorical opening of Raval manifested itself in social, cultural and economic transformations – albeit contrary to expectations. Different social and ethnic groups, urban functions and economic actors – all with strong, if different needs for public space – found a suitable setting in the neighbourhood. The coexistence of old-established bars, minimalist designer boutiques, and Filipino hairdressing salons has redefined the social geography and the urban rhythm. Monica Degen describes the different processes of appropriation and interaction in the new empty spaces in the course of a day – by dog owners, children playing, immigrant families having picnics, and homeless people looking for a resting-place for the night in protected niches. The

urban space is “digested within the neighbourhood’s daily life” (Degen 2010). However, gatherings continue to be mainly group-focussed with only occasional interactions and specific to older Spanish residents or immigrants. As Carme Gual states “we say that it’s a cultural thing but in fact, they are doing things we used to do, not so long ago.” (Gual / Santos 2011)

Magrinyà / Maza also pick up on this idea when analysing the links between immigration and the *huecos* (holes, in-between spaces) in Barcelona’s historic centre. The new public areas have encouraged a restructuring of the social realm and are now under the growing pressure of conflict-laden competition between various actors, triggered by the coexistence of various groups in, and laying claim to, the same space. The authors describe the social space produced in this way as complex and thus fragile. They warn of the image of peaceful multiculturalism merely created for TV cameras – “Se produce así una fácil escena de multiculturalidad virtual producida por la cámara oportuna del fotógrafo o del reportero de TV” (Magrinyà / Maza 2001). This generic image of diversity fails to factor in the different processes of appropriation of space and overlooks potentials for conflict. A sustainable social environment requires citizen empowerment to establish a proper political stance accompanying social change and a re-thinking of spatial qualities and use.

Establishing a political sphere

Conflictual situations of El Raval’s past and present are as varied as its heterogeneous social structure ranging from residents mobbed by landlords, expulsion, prostitution, noise pollution, and petty crime targeting tourists and residents alike. However, the actual situation in the neighbourhood is less precarious than its media representation. In fact, there seem to be two opposing ways of portraying Raval – on the one hand advertising a vibrant multiculturalism to attract tourists and on the other hand stigmatising its residents and exaggerating individual conflicts in the local media (Mohedano 2011).

Both images of the neighbourhood are telling the truth and deviating from it at the same time. Various ethnic and social groups are spread rather evenly over Raval without dominating specific areas. Yet, the plurality is not translating itself into the eclectic mix one might expect. In the private as well as public arena residents tend to stay within their respective groups keeping a somewhat apathetic distance to each other. Conflicts are location-specific and vary throughout the neighbourhood. While prostitution is prominent in two streets around Plaça de Salvador Seguí, robberies pose an issue in Carrer de l’Hospital. The northern part of Raval struggles with the increase of tourists and noise pollution, while Raval Sud sees a high frequency in changeover of small businesses. Though the challenges of everyday life in the neighbourhood are diverse and complex, the main issue in all of Raval is the lack of resident interaction.

Keeping a reserved distance is starting to culminate in open displays of dissatisfaction. The resident movement Raval per Viure, formed in 2009, is trying to channel protest against what is considered anti-social behaviour

such as drug-dealing and street prostitution, against “l’ocupació il·lícita del carrer”, the illegal occupation of the street, as stated on their internet blog. They initiated the banner campaign *Volem un barri digne* (We want a decent neighbourhood) - banners are visible in Raval and other parts of Barcelona expressing the lingering dissatisfaction with perceived conflicts and the authorities’ lack of effort to intervene but it also exemplifies the successful manifestation of *zero-tolerance* in people’s minds. So far, RPV has failed to join the different resident groups in a collective movement and its supposed links to right-wing politics has sparked opposition amongst the leftist youth of Raval.

Recent initiatives such as the *Pla de barris del Raval Sud* put in place by the Barcelona City Council and Generalitat de Catalunya in order to react to growing discontent try to accompany urban planning with comprehensive mediation processes. Some scholars argue that these attempts of social ordering and consensus politics tend to have the opposite effect, thwarting communication and aggravating the potential for conflict – “local administration itself has prompted fragmentation in the neighbourhood” (Marzorati 2011). It remains to be seen whether mediation instigated by authorities many residents are already sceptical of can have a positive influence on the neighbourhood. At this stage, self-organisation and soft activism, “urban projects that create collectivities on micro, neighbourhood levels” (Negri et al. 2008) seem to be more promising. “Since the workspace is no longer an entrance into politics, the neighbourhood provides access to another form of political practice.” (Negri et al. 2008). In that respect, public areas can give a new impetus.

One of Raval’s major renewal projects, the Rambla del Raval, was widely criticised during early years of construction due to its disproportional scale and lack of integration in the urban fabric. Derelict housing blocks had to be removed and residents relocated in order to make space for the new axis centrally located in Raval’s southern part. “In a district known for its back streets, damp and insalubrity there can never be too much sun, but there does exist a sensation of space out of all proportion, of frontier or no-man’s-land, rather than of a shared square, helping to bind the district together.” (Borja et al. 2004, 164).

However, ten years later, we can state that Raval’s Rambla is addressing specific needs with respect to bigger events or gatherings and shows that insufficient physical ties can be overcome when the socio-political realm steps in. An example is the annual rice tasting festival *Mostra d'Arrossos del món* organised by the *Associació de comerciants de la Rambla del Raval*, a neighbourhood organisation of entrepreneurs. Numerous Raval restaurants with different ethnic backgrounds cook traditional rice dishes for the neighbourhood free of charge and install themselves on the Rambla. Residents wander in-between stalls, engaging in conversations while waiting for their servings. The different culinary influences are not only representing the neighbourhood’s diversity but most importantly it is a

simple, yet effective strategy to bring different people together to redefine public space and hence, act against the spreading of privatisation, individualisation and xenophobia. This kind of non-imposing political activity encourages residents to find common ground and to overcome ethnic or social frontiers. The gathering is taking subliminal conflicts, prejudice and scepticism both physically and psychologically into the public.

Conclusion and prospects

The radical surgical interventions performed in Raval use emptiness as a planning tool to oppose density. They are followed by the spreading of a new social tissue whose ties are still very loose and fragile until today. The physical opening results in a repositioning in the perception of the city and allows profound economic, social and functional change leaving behind the goals of local planning authorities and encouraging a pluralist development. With the aid of plazas duras, urban zero points, Raval eludes administrative control and develops a density of ethnic and social groups, cultural and economic actors. The reduced mass results in a densification of social space. However, the new heterogeneous environment requires linkages on various levels, a multi-layered political sphere. While the initial urban planning objectives were targeting the most urgent problems such as providing open areas and public institutions, now, more than 20 years later, the demographic structure is different and so are the needs of Raval's residents. Old boundaries have dissolved, yet, new ones appeared. Though the neighbourhood is generally more integrated in the city context, internal frontiers have emerged and residents are struggling to establish a collective identity. In recent years, the concept of hard spaces has been somewhat softened by furnishings, e.g. sporting equipment that residents asked for. Though assigning specific functions happens in response to people's needs, it must be stated that the public arena is then more likely to evoke a sense of ownership rather than parity.

Urban zero points have given rise to different interest groups, some conflicting, each to a certain extent laying claim to public space. The formerly monosocial milieu has become an urban microcosm. In that respect, we can describe Raval's development as the local manifestation of a global process. The neighbourhood has evolved from a social fringe area to a pioneering part of the city, marked by overlaps and simultaneities that reflect global transformations. The current situation between apathy, resentment and great potential shows clearly the questions raised in densified urban settings. It can inform us about and encourage trends of further urban development. Translating the diversity of activities and inhabitants into a normal state of coexistence can only be achieved if residents manage to create a shared identity of place and establish a broader political stance that is inclusive rather than denying diversity.

Substantial social changes, gentrification and immigration, all happening at the same time and at unprecedented pace, have put the neighbourhood under pressure. However, the recent economic crisis,

has slowed down real-estate speculation as well as immigration, thus Raval has been given the chance to catch its breath. It is in desperate need of negotiating ethnic and social diversity, of managing prostitution, petty crime and tourism. Future development of the neighbourhood and the capability of conflict resolution in a heterogeneous setting will hinge, in particular, on an adequate supply of public spaces and, with regards to Balibrea's thoughts on interpellation (Balibrea 2004), whether all individuals feel addressed as citizens.

The radical tabula rasa injection of urban zero points in Raval gives them a decidedly indefinite character, providing a non-exclusive arena that encourages self-organisation and is open to diverse ideas and ways of appropriation. It is here that a pluralist political space can unfold through the process of communication and acting. As the intervention at Rambla del Raval has shown, soft activism, self-organised urban movements on local level, helps to re-appropriate plazas duras. Though these initiatives might not be intentionally political at first they can attain a political dimension once a group has formed, a social space has been produced (Negri 2008). Hence, in order to support Raval's re-politicization, not in the sense of a hierarchic democratic order but rather as evenly distributed responsibility and rights to political practice, urban zero points need soft activism rather than functional softening.

In the case of Raval, zero points act as both, generators of diversity changing the social tissue and mediators in overcoming fragmentation and strengthening the political sphere.

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