

# Learning from Barcelona: Discourse, Power and Praxis in the Sustainable City

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## Abstract

*In the 2004 Forum for World Cultures, Barcelona politicians and intellectuals situated sustainability as a key issue for global and local debate. This event also distilled historical experiences of place, contact and conflict that have shaped Barcelona as a global city, while subsequent discussions illuminate the complexities of the creation of an urban culture of sustainability as contemporary urban social practice. Reading sustainability as myth and practice in both spatial and temporal contexts reveals the extent to which ecological commitments combine changes in urban policy, rhetorical statements, positioning within more general competitions for urban branding and citizen responses. Drawing on archival and cultural analysis as well as longterm ethnography, this paper examines Barcelona's search for social ecological policy and the complications of multiple visions and practices of sustainable development. [Barcelona, sustainability, Worlds Fairs, Branding, environmental planning]*

In July 2010, the Catalan parliament created a municipal umbrella association, the Àrea Metropolitana de Barcelona, that links Barcelona and surrounding communities in planning and projects; issues associated with ecology and sustainability occupy an especially prominent place on the new AMB website (<http://www.amb.cat/web/guest>). In subsequent months, the city and the consortium have used the most recent municipal plan, VISION 2020, to promote Barcelona as “a referent for sustainability for cities in warm climates” (Nuevo Plan Estratégico 2010). In February 2011, a joint project with CISCO to wire and map Barcelona as a smart city again was cited on the *Computerworld* website to identify the city as a “global model for urban sustainable development and an economic motor for Southern Europe” (Cisco convertirá a Barcelona 2011). It is easy to read such developments and their corollary publicity as strategies to keep Barcelona within the cohort of world cities for whom sustainability has become one more necessary qualification for global status, like a high-tech airport, technology park or major sporting event (Short 2004; Elshestawy 2010). Yet, while it is impossible to evaluate the impact or meaning of plans so resolutely anchored in the future, we can make sense of actions, governance, spatializations in the city, and messages broadcast to the world within longer term processes by which Barcelona elites have staged urban discussions of modernities that have also become part of wider urban culture. In this process, myth, practice and contradiction allow us to understand the depths of policies and changes in urban cultures of sustainability.<sup>1</sup>

“Sustainability” took center stage in the city as one of three organizing themes (with “cultural diversity” and “peace”) of Barcelona’s most recent global mega-event, the 2004 Universal Forum of World Cultures (Fòrum

Univeral de les Cultures). Conceived and publicized by the city's elites as an alternative to the passive, paternalistic gaze of World's Fairs because of its commitment to tackle global problems through dialogue, this summer event showcased exhibits, entertainment and discussions. The Forum's grounds offered massive displays on future planning, diverse foodstuffs, nightly concerts, spectacular attractions, fair trade shops and dozens of global symposia aimed at stimulating discussion spaces in the city and the mass media. Urbanites and tourists could take a new light rail to a newly-rebuilt post-industrial seacoast district in which the Forum was situated and access (for a fee) the postmodern grounds of the event. Meanwhile, closed circuit rebroadcast and extensive press coverage of speeches by global celebrities—including the Dalai Lama, Salman Rushdie and Rigoberta Menchú—mediated the fair into the wider city. While the Forum closed in September 2004 without the global recognition or numbers of visitors that its organizers had foreseen (albeit with the promise of successor events in the future in Monterrey, Valparaiso, Naples and Québec), it marked a critical moment in the presence, meaning and practice of sustainability in Barcelona.

The Forum nonetheless built on the 1992 Summer Olympics, the 1929 World's Fair and the 1888 International Exposition, among other events, even as it crystallized tensions among local histories of governance and development, global dialogues about environmental and social concerns, and the relationship of paradigms and practices in local academic discussion, culture and ecological politics. Seven years later, then, we can observe how discourse and planning constitute both myth and praxis in the creation of complex webs of sustainable urban culture. As top-down events, all these Barcelona stagings seem to exemplify sustainability as myth, as an imposed paradigm through which claims to understand and act upon the city emerge. Both practices of power and multiplicity of meanings recall values that Roland Barthes associated with myth on the right, and that we might now read as "ecobranding" or "greenwashing," ideologies in which sustainability becomes a necessary attribute of global cities but not a sincere commitment (1957). Yet, one might read myth in terms of generative metaphors that actually underpin changes in policy, discussion and praxis over longer periods of time: an evaluation more favorable but scarcely more measurable. Moreover, Barcelona campaigns have been met with local critiques and variable responses in practice and everyday life. These, too, allow a longer analysis of cultural development that reveals dialogue as well as contradictions within these events and images as they influence social practice.

Neither mega-events, myths, nor plans have transmuted Barcelona into an idyllic green city. Still, the increments of practice and discussion, in domestic and neighborhood levels as well as broad stages, evoke what Adrian Parr has envisioned in *Hijacking Sustainability* (2009) as a middle ground "culture of sustainability" as social practice, where grassroots action and government or institutional powers intersect:

recognizing that a sustainable design is not something that is performed on a subject, the politics of sustainable culture is, as Judith Butler might argue, a matter of how a subject is brought into being and then how the subject reiterates or contests the 'discursive conditions' of its own emergence' (2009:9).

Parr nevertheless underscores the dangers implicit in abusing the social and ecological components of sustainability in the name of consumption or development. Materials and dialogues from Barcelona, in fact, remind us how complex the construction of practices and values of sustainability are when they involve both governance and a living citizenry.

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To analyze urban sustainability as process, this paper begins with historical patterns of modern urbanism, discourse and response in Barcelona that led up to the 2004 Forum as a local/global event. On that foundation, it scrutinizes appropriations of sustainability in the city before and after 2004 as markers of how discourse and action have evolved. It is important to distinguish greenwashing from partial, incomplete attempts at change: if Barcelona is not yet sustainable by many scientific uses of the term that does not discount the city as a model for policy and debate. In fact, the Forum's triadic identification of sustainability, diversity and peace, framed by longer social and cultural processes, underscores the relevance of the city as an effective unit of action in reshaping environmental cultures. Given disparities between the professed commitment of people and organizations worldwide to environmental improvement and the lag in legislation or actions that bring about change, understanding the incomplete and multivalent potential of urban sustainability is a vital component of urban studies of ecology, myth and practice. By focusing on Barcelona public discourse/debate as a myth translated into policy and imagery, moreover, I link sustainability to other, less cohesive voices—academic critiques, institutional competition and popular responses—that also have transformed the city in ecological and sociocultural terms.

This investigation forms part of four decades of work in Barcelona in which I have explored society, culture and politics of this fascinating modern city. In this apprenticeship, my analyses often have crystallized around key eventscapes that have meshed the tensions of local/urban identity with global processes underpinning the transformations of the city (McDonogh 1986, 1999). Historically, eventscapes include both expositions like the previous 1888 and 1929 World's Fairs in the city and more convulsive periods like the Civil War, which canceled the 1936 Popular Olympics scheduled for Barcelona. During my own work with the city and its peoples, the 1975 death of the Spanish fascist leader Francisco Franco and the transition to democracy that followed catalyzed fervent public debate and action regarding the city and its citizens, the Catalan polity and the state. Subsequently, the 1992 Barcelona Summer Olympics and the Forum of World Cultures of 2004 epitomized the ways in which this changing city has redefined its urban imagery and claimed a global gaze. Yet, while 1992 affirmed a decade of post-dictatorial political, economic and cultural changes in Barcelona and a newly competitive position among world cities within a mass-mediated universe, local elites projected 2004 as an affirmation of Barcelona as a place where the future of *all global* cities would take shape: "a new and creative space to think and experiment concerning the principle cultural and social conflicts that this world must confront in the 21<sup>st</sup> century..." ([www.barcelona2004.org/cat/ques](http://www.barcelona2004.org/cat/ques)' 11/5/2003).

These eventscapes embody paradoxes as well. Since 1992 Barcelona has become a branded destination offering history, leisure, the postmodernities of star architects and cosmopolitan buzz; the metropolis has become a city of consumption and capital for a new quality of life whose very economy challenges any model of sustainable growth. The global differences that the Forum publicity celebrated as cultural diversity, and which resonate with social sustainability, seem problematic when translated into Latino workers in McJobs in the center of Barcelona, emergent Chinatowns near the Forum site or problems facing local and immigrant gypsies across the city, much less the relationship of these local and global groups to "fair" balances of energy and resources. Barcelona's development and discourses also raise questions as to what extent sustainability, defined as an *urban* problem, reifies untenable limitations on the ecology of city. In this case, Catalonia embodies a political and cultural hinterland for the city as well as a political unit linked to a regional ecosystem where the ecological

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footprint of Barcelona weighs heavily. Appeals to the geographical space and cultural continuities of the Mediterranean city, the *terroir*, like widespread awareness of negative (externalizing) stereotypes of Catalans within the Spanish state, speak to how sustainability takes shape within local traditions.

Nor do the questions of sustainability end at the limits of the city, the region and the state. One of the crucial points of difference between Barcelonins and their state has been an active, evolving civic discussion of modernity linked to Europe and a wider world. Newcomers from northern Europe (for retirement, tourism, lifestyle) and the global South insist on Barcelona's identity as a global city linked to human, energy and resource flows beyond Catalunya or Spain. Since the 1970s, Barcelona's elites—including politicians, economists, businesspeople and "experts"—have reshaped the city's role in global interurban competition. Post-Franco leaders and citizens have sought to balance regional/local governance, external politics (state and European), and constructed modernities (especially media and design). Amid these frames, Barcelona and its citizens have made claims on the future that tie its modernist movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the "designiness" of its urban reform in the 1980s and its reinvention in 2004 and contemporary claims about global planning models (McDonogh 1986; Hughes 1992; Michonneau 2001; Resina 2008). Such extremely well-documented continuities amid deeply rooted tensions of local culture make Barcelona an urban laboratory for contemporary discussions of urban sustainability.

Thus, as we scrutinize sustainability, whether in the 2004 Forum or the everyday life of the city, contradictions as well as promises permeate contemporary actions, policies and cultural understandings. Learning from Barcelona means paying attention to how Barcelonins learn as well as wider lessons about global urban sustainability.

## Rethinking the past as urban political ecosystem

Despite its postmodern messages, architectures, and technologies, the 2004 Forum resonated with centuries of Barcelona projects, from the pageantry of medieval trade fairs to recent international assemblies. Such events long have provided arenas for the definition of political, economic and cultural modernities, especially since industrial expositions in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century that took on an even more modern and global form with the Universal Exposition of 1888 and the International Exposition of 1929 (McDonogh 1986; Grau 1988; Grandas 1988). Like other urbane global expositions, these also have combined multiple urban elite strategies including real estate development, assertion of political economic hegemonies, and global-local cultural productions of language, literature, arts, architecture and urbanism. In Barcelona, these highly visible celebrations have conveyed the insistent message that the city could be more European and modern and, at the same time, less Spanish (Michonneau 2001).

Such events have created places, meanings and discussion for modernity itself. Barcelona's first major modern world event, the Universal Exposition of 1888, celebrated decades of financial-industrial growth that had challenged regional dependence on the Spanish state, while designers borrowed Parisian models for an expanding city and its new elites. The fairgrounds reincorporated lands held for centuries by an "occupying" Spanish army that had defeated Catalans in the War of Spanish Succession (1701–1714). Turning the malevolent citadel into the verdant Ciutadella Park also anchored a fashionable promenade on the northern edge of the city that closed off nearby industrial neighborhoods. With its romantic gardens and waterfall (including the input of

young Antoni Gaudí), its proud new architecture and its social geography, this exposition reshaped the physical and social ecology of the industrial city. At the same time, this growth stimulated militant leftist organization among those who had arrived in the city for factories and construction of the exposition itself (Oyón 2008).

The subsequent 1929 International Exposition, dedicated to electricity, was scheduled as a 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration of 1888. Yet, it faced years of delay due to bloody class warfare in the city and the global impact of World War I (despite Spanish neutrality). Again, this event catalyzed processes already in motion, especially as it spurred development of the mountain of Montjuïc (another point of centurial Spanish military control) and lands south of the older city that would become the elite garden residential zone of Pedralbes (McDonogh 1986; Grandas 1988; Michonneau 2001). The enormous debts this fair incurred later spurred protests against local elite clients of the Spanish Primo de Rivera dictatorship and the monarchy. Within months of the fair's closing, protests converged with the widespread drive across the Spanish state to end these regimes. The fall of the Spanish monarchy was followed by declarations of Catalan independence in the Second Spanish Republic and intense negotiations between Barcelona and Madrid. The vigorous journalism of these days reminds us that success is not the only way that mega-events take on meaning; modernities also take shape in counterpoint to monuments.

Indeed, the claims of 1929 were inverted by the aborted Barcelona Popular Olympics of 1936. Here, leftists, nationalists and internationalists in the city invited proletarian teams from across the world to join competitions ranging from chess to soccer. This celebration, a global alternative to the Nazi Berlin Olympics and to earlier bourgeois elite urbanism, offered a social ecological agenda rather than further physical transformations of the city. Barcelona reused spaces of 1929 for a new audience, housing workers temporarily with other workers instead of expanding the tourist infrastructure that had emerged in the 1920s. These Olympics nonetheless continued—and perhaps widened—Barcelonins's fascination with global mega-events. Sadly, these games ended before they began, cut short on opening day by the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. The Civil War and triumphant fascist regime of Francisco Franco also combated memories of the 1936 Popular Olympics, which were only truly retrieved amid preparations for 1992 (Pujadas and Santacana 1991).

The victorious Franco regime, meanwhile, used Barcelona as a platform for global/local events, most noticeably in the Eucharistic Congress of 1952, which brought selective global approbation (from the Vatican and allies such as Argentina) to an isolated state. Celebrations aimed at a recalcitrant Barcelona (and via media, at world audiences) and included masses at Gaudí's Expiatory Temple of the Holy Family (Sagrada Família), a troubled symbol for the city. This event brought rural Catalans into the city and, in physical terms, spurred some constructions, such as a social housing project limited to the worthy Christian poor, built in a cruciform pattern. While this event made Barcelona at least temporarily the heart of a global Catholic world, it also has disappeared from a more general narrative of the city as creator of successful events. During my decades of work there, citizens as well as texts have generally highlighted the more visible and elite monuments 1888 and 1992 as landmark dates, with grudging recognition of 1929, little knowledge about 1936 and even fewer mentions of 1952.

Any competing hegemonic framework of official mega-events, however, has been challenged consistently by a revolutionary chronicle equally compelling in the history and culture of the city if less visible in its physical monumentality. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, for example, labor organizers and anar-



chists took to the street. Their actions and official repressions won the city the nickname “City of the Bombs.” The repression that followed the 1893 bombing of the Opera House, a later Corpus Christi bombing and the events of the 1909 Tragic Week, where disgruntled workers burned urban churches, also underpins divided/divisive memories of urban citizens. As Temma Kaplan has noted in her splendid studies of worker activism at the turn of the century, strikes, funerals and other smaller actions, often staged by women in their own neighborhoods or the central Rambles, defined a debate over rights to and in the city at a very different scale of the practice of social and physical ecology from that we associate with the politics of the Olympic and post-Olympic city (1992; see Oyón 2008). That such class-based violence erupted in Civil War (1936–1939) has suggested to Joan Ramon Resina a memory of forms of actions in counterpoint to elite models of new buildings, world invitations and prosperous celebrations (2008). That left and right, proletariat and bourgeoisie came together in the 1992 Olympics, underscores the widespread repression of the Franco regime that had constrained local elites as well as alternative voices but reunited them in response to outside controls.

In the 1980s, as Barcelona emerged from the long shadow of the fascist and centralist Franco regime, the quest for a global mega-event came to occupy a central place in civic consciousness. After decades of cultural repression, ecological depredation in the name of industrial development and urban paralysis in the face of central state actions, newly elected socialist leaders built widespread accord around an event that would crown the rebirth of the city. This goal also entailed the IOC presidency of a “politically flexible” Catalan former ally of Franco, Juan Antonio Samaranch (Maurí and Uría 1998). As more than one colleague and politician has said to me, “if we had not gotten the Olympics, we would have needed to invent something else.”

But what else meant so much? The Olympics themselves, after all, had been recreated in 1896 as a global showcase of European privilege evident in the selection of host cities that long overlooked billions living in South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, South America or—until 2008—China (with Rio yet to come in 2016). In 1992 Barcelona held the global stage as a member of this Northern club at a critical moment that transformed the image of the city for global consumers in dialectic with significant changes of political economics, culture and urban form in the post-Franco transition (Bohigas et al. 1991; Maurí and Uría 1998; McDonogh 1999; McNeill 1999; Roche 2000; Hargreaves 2000; Monclús 2011). This meant a Europeanness of shared values and exclusive practices, of privilege and power. This is a European modernity that Barcelona governments have continued to capitalize on ever since.

Barcelona’s preparations for this event, funded by generous support from the European Union as it sought to develop Spain as a new member, promoted concrete projects of urban ecology ranging from sewers and subways to reclamation of modernist facades to construction of public spaces and parks for which the city won global awards (Hargreaves 2000). Planners reoriented the post-industrial city towards the Mediterranean littoral as Olympic Port and urban beachfront. These efforts drew on newly integrated regimes of governance, academics, architecture and planning—indeed, Mayor Pasqual Maragall held a PhD in economics—as well as popular associations that had constituted a civil society of opposition under Franco, many of whom joined actively in rethinking the city (see Maurí and Uría 1998; Marshall 2004).

The decade leading up to 1992 also witnessed controversies between the city and its socialist regime and the newly autonomous government of Catalonia, led by a conservative party whose power base lay in smaller cities and villages across the countryside and conservative elements within Barcelona

(Maurí and Uría 1998). Unlike previous urban events, in fact, 1992 summer Olympic venues would incorporate the region, including satellite cities around Barcelona and more distant destinations like Banyoles (crew), Seu d'Urgell (kayaking) and Valencia and Zaragoza (soccer). Even so, authorities were unable to agree on some key facilities like the mass transit connections among Olympic venues. Despite these issues, the Olympics marked a major modern success in the cultural ecology of Barcelona, locally and globally. The campaign to sell the games to citizens before the opening of the Olympics entailed a physical and spiritual revivalism marked by the seal of global approval. Criticism, in fact, proved remarkably muted compared to both earlier and later events. And the project laid the foundation for active pursuit of future global success, a renewed commitment to a postmodern modernity (Hargreaves 2000; Hughes 1992).

After 1992, Barcelona claimed a continuing world stage through favorable publicity that has fostered its contemporary success as a tourist destination (5,000,000 visitors per year as opposed to the daytrippers of the 1960s who fomented the ecological chaos of coastal overdevelopment and mass tourism on the contiguous Costa Brava). The city has become a center for global congresses, from AIDS and architecture to international conferences on mobile phones, transplants, vascular dementia and lambada. The grounds of the 1929 fair host ever-growing trade fairs while urban tourist bureaus have promoted special tourist years for the heritage of Gaudí, Dalí and Picasso and the contemporaneity of design (Narotzky 2007). And while the city has competed, and failed, to become a European capital of culture (Mascarell 1995), local universities, museums, foundations and the Centre de Cultura Contemporània have built on the global discourses of modernity intertwined with the games (and the Olimpiada Cultural). Barcelona has become a regular center for meetings on the global future, in rotation with Paris, London and a few other European capitals. In the opinion of some citizens, its civic economy and leadership have become addicted to global gazes and capital, leaving it hostage to demands of consumption that potentially work against ecological restraints.

The Forum 2004, although not so well known as the Olympiad to those outside the city and state, embodied local ferial traditions of urban change and global recognition while altering them. It reinforced Barcelona as an identifiable place within Catalonia and the Mediterranean, while the role of UNESCO as a primary partner (who had agreed to act as such in 1997 with the understanding that it would cost them nothing) legitimated the global albeit vague idea of a new arena to discuss world conditions. Locally, this collaboration of the city government, Catalan polity and Spanish state was touted as the “second transformation” of the city (La Unesco aprobará hoy 1997; Clos Matheu 2002) by reference to the Olympics. The flexibility of urban public relations even allowed a *re-reading* of that massive earlier project as a step towards sustainability. Hence, in 2003, Mayor Joan Clos observed that:

The city is attracting more tourists, having increased from about one million per year to 3 million each year at this time, with projections of 10 million a year in 2010. Barcelona has moved from being a declining city dependent upon its industrial and manufacturing base to a world-class city of the 21st century with a strong public-private cooperation and the political will to continue to strengthen its beauty and sustainability, a true example of Sophocles' observation of the human passion of building cities. (Scrimger 2003)

The Forum also conveyed other messages. While the 1992 Olympics entailed the modernization of infrastructures, the recuperation of historic and

community spaces and a new collection of showpieces by global architects, 2004 moved physical development northward to the coastal border of the city and suburban communities. Suburbanized malls, upscale residential buildings, highways and a beach built over the city's redesigned and energy-efficient sewage treatment plant took shape through neoliberal public-private investment. At the same time, the Forum provoked new skepticism in the democratic city. Despite attempts to bring in civic workers, school children and regional audiences, attendance never met the organizers' projections. The Spanish Congress of Anthropology, meanwhile, condemned the Forum for its manipulation of culture and ecology:

The project seems too weighted down by institutional commitments and urbanistic and real estate implications to not see it as subsumed by plans to promote a city destined for tourists and investors and strategies of political self-justification before its own citizens. (IX Congreso 2002)

Once inaugurated, the forum faced other lively critiques, including a mock invasion from the sea that ridiculed claims to universality and seriousness.<sup>2</sup> Published attacks included journalist Manuel Trallero's *BARCELONA 2004 COMO MENTIRA* (2004); anthropologist Manuel Delgado's *La ciudad mentirosa* (2007) and literary critic Joan Ramon Resina's reflections in *Barcelona's Vocation of Modernity* (2008). Most critics focused on global-local cultural issues such as displacement or ignorance of local minorities rather than environmental concerns. Geographer Horacio Capel, however, lamented the claims of the fair in terms of everyday environmental issues:

The obsession of City Hall with modernity and its great interventions, like the Forum of World Cultures, by thinking about the international dimensions of the city have overlooked the necessities of citizens. The copious investments these recent projects have demanded (perhaps 75,000 million pesetas for the Forum [roughly \$500,000,000]) have detracted from the maintenance of the city. In many areas Barcelona is dirty and degraded to those who see it . . . Lack of care, abandonment, inattention to popular complaints—unless they have influence to come out in the press or on television—are felt as an aggravation by many citizens. (2005:104)

Nonetheless, this combination of development, publicized eventscapes and criticisms has influenced urban strategies even into Spain's current economic malaise, without plans for another global mega-event. In March 2009, for example, Barcelona's mayor Jordi Hereu announced plans for the reconstruction of the Vallbona quarter as Spain's first "ecological neighborhood." This area forms one of the outermost extensions of the city, beyond the rundown, working-class Nou Barris that have been a focus of intense social and physical intervention since the 1970s. The land for such an eco-project has been controlled by the state and Catalan autonomous regional government, the Generalitat, but is being transformed by tunnels for the new high-speed line connecting Barcelona and Paris. Amid potential changes in related rail and highway linkages, new plans proposed to "humanize" the access to Barcelona. Sponsored by Socialists and their Leftist-Green party allies, this *ecobarri* project called for an investment of 322 million Euros (\$500 million) for 2000 new housing units, most of which would have some official sponsorship, alongside civic centers and parks, all constructed to minimize energy use



and to preserve the historical “agricultural” character of the region (Ollés 2009). The project was publicized at its most visionary stage: even the officials presenting it to the public noted the problems of arranging control of the land and the crisis of housing and employment now flogging Spain, which made such investments unlikely in the immediate future. Still, among the few acid comments published on the website of the Barcelona paper *El Periódico*, civic skepticism based on previous experiences is evident:

ECO BARRIO!!! LO QUE NOS FALTABA!!CÓÑO!! SON LOS  
ULTIMOS CAMPOS QUE QUEDAN DE CULTIVO A LA  
ENTRADA DE BARCELONA!!! ESTA BIEN SER ECO POLITICO,  
DE PUTA MADRE. ESTA CIUDAD ES UN PARQUE TEMÁTICO  
PARA GUIRIS.

(Eco- neighborhood!!!! Just what we needed !! Fuck !! These are the  
only cultivated fields left at the entrance to Barcelona. It’s OK to be  
ecopolitical, but dammit this city is a theme park for foreigners).  
([www.elperiodico.cat/default.asp?idpublicacio\\_PK=46&idnoticia\\_PK=594422&idioma=CAT](http://www.elperiodico.cat/default.asp?idpublicacio_PK=46&idnoticia_PK=594422&idioma=CAT))

*“This city is a  
theme park for  
foreigners”*

Despite such initial fanfare, the project has scarcely advanced and, in 2011, remains a point of contention between local Greens and the nationalist *Convergència i Unió* parties and its conservative allies in the *Partido Popular*.<sup>3</sup>

This overview of urban eventscapes as a context for staging and contesting ecologies of change, including the contemporary embrace of sustainability, suggests a variety of readings and voices. Yet, from more than a century of urban mega-events as ritual spaces, the repeated elite formation and control of stages for public myth is clear. For decades, competing elites in Barcelona have promoted urban events to advance political and economic agendas related to development, politics and global positioning. These goals have only been partially realized in each case, with real estate development, public or private, often trumping cultural change. Nonetheless, such events must be read within a wide range involvement and discussion among many urban agents, ranging from embrace to rejection to apathy. While the shifts from electricity to Eucharist, or from sports to peace, are not mere localizations of fashions in global intellectual discourse, this history frames both policies and receptions of sustainability today.

While the direction of “modernization” might not have been clearly predicted by organizers or opponents, these events became crucibles for the reformulation of urban modernities as discourses and practices. As such, they brought together elements already emergent in the city and channeled them into subsequent debates. These processes of contested urban space, discourse, policy and practice allow us to return to Forum 2004 and the development of sustainability in the city with a deeper analytic understanding of local roots and global implications.

## Consuming sustainable development and its ambiguities

The official description of Sustainable Development on the Forum website in 2002 offered a vague, resource-oriented model, notable for its lack of precision and the far-reaching extent of its claims:

Today it is more urgent than ever to find forms of growth that respect natural resources and take into account the need not to misspend them. Sustainability, moreover, is not limited to ecological aspects. Without a habitable environment it is not possible to create the conditions necessary for living together, the dialogue between people and peace.<sup>4</sup>

Sustainable development as a primary goal for a project that sought to bring millions of visitor/consumers to the city and to develop 326,000 square meters of urban space already embodies profound contradictions. While 140,000 square meters of green space were added to the city, they are interwoven with highways, a light rail, elite residences and shopping malls. A short-lived Barcelona humor magazine, *Angelitos negros*, skewered this paradox in 1999: “we could have called it ‘Devouring without Shame,’ or ‘Consuming More without Being Consumed’ . . . but economic ideologues decided to call it sustainable growth” (Sarto 1999:17).<sup>5</sup>

What if we read the 2004 Forum as a catalyst? While *sostenibilitat* (Catalan) and *sostenibilidad* (Castilian) resonate with long-standing historical visions of the limits, balance and frugality of the Mediterranean, this concept and even these words only appeared widely in public discourse in the 1990s (Braudel 1972; Busquets 2005, see Masjuan Bracons 1992 on 1930s anarchist models of redistributive environmentalism). Sustainability as an imported, modern concept drew on global documents such as the Brundtland report of 1987, Agenda 21 in Rio and the Aalborg Declaration on Sustainable Cities and Towns of 1994 that focused on responsible stewardship of resources for future generations. A 1997 conference at the nearby Universitat de Girona brought together planners, historians and architects to discuss the sustainable city as a “process of transformation” (Rueda et al. 1999). Here, activist Martí Olivella defined sustainability as “a ‘necessary utopia’ that nonetheless demanded realistic responses” (1999:118).

Soon afterwards, the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, a think-tank/ exhibition space that often publicizes ideologies of the city’s new elites, presented a major exhibit on the Sustainable City. In the introduction to the accompanying volume, regional politician Manuel Royes specifically credited Aalborg and Agenda 21 as stimuli for this discussion (CCCB 1999:7). The city of Barcelona’s adherence to Agenda 21 followed the election/appointment of a Green Party representative in 1995 although even with Socialist support, a final commitment to the charter came after “two years of ferocious disputes” (Antequera 2002:np).

At the same time, politicians and intellectuals sought to situate Barcelona as a voice within this global dialogue. Using the CCCB as a pulpit, Royes noted that “Not all cities are equal. But from the viewpoint of the Diputació, we have tried to make this exhibit an example of how to include the particularities of each urban nucleus in a global project” (CCCB 1999:7). Museums speak not only to the past but to the present and future. In the case of *La ciutat sostenible*, this multi-room exhibit juxtaposed high-tech representations of advertisements, massive stacks of post-industrial detritus and computer imagery that attacked sprawl, pollution, and consumption. These intertwined strategies motivated more glocal (global/local) displays about recycling, sprawl, automotive dependency and consumption. Finally, the exhibit tour ended in a computer lab presenting information on new Barcelona projects and offering connections with other cities on the Continent. As such, the exhibit reinforced Barcelona’s modernity, Europeaness, connectedness and even implied its sustainable superiority.

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Indeed, the exhibit went further as it insistently contrasted global ecological problems with the Mediterranean city and its compactness, decentralization and climate. Hence, even before Barcelona would become sustainable, the organizers emphasized its intrinsic local advantages over the generally-recognized “vanguard” cities of Northern Europe:

The Mediterranean city is the perfect terrain for rethinking urban ecosystems in terms of sustainability. The players are the citizens. The ball represents the relationship between energy and information. The rules are sustainable development. Until a few decades ago, the Mediterranean city’s urban weave had preserved its compact and diverse character. The philosophy consisted of augmenting complexity without substantially increasing the exploitation of peripheral systems . . . (CCCB 1999:116)

This formula has subsequently been interwoven with the history of the city itself, as in Joan Busquet’s artfully subtitled *Barcelona: The Urban Evolution of a Compact City* (2005), despite academic critiques of this interpretation of city limits and meanings (Capel 2005).

This pseudo-geographical explanation of an essentialist Mediterranean linked this museum exposition to place if not specifically to nation (evoking another tension between city/audience and Catalonia as polity, government and cultural unity to which I will return). The exhibit also demanded elision of considerable data from Barcelona’s history, including the dependence of its Industrial Revolution on workers from around Spain and markets in the peninsula as well as Spanish colonies in the Caribbean and Asia, among other energy displacements. This erasure resonates with the treatment of issues of race and globalism in the new Europe as a whole that fractured around the Forum of Cultures. Yet, this exhibit underscored a repeated claim in contemporary Barcelona planning—that the city is not only part of Europe—and the world—but a model for the rest of it.

Hence, the public celebration of sustainability in 2004 did not inaugurate any discussion so much as it affirmed and extended an incipient discourse of academics, planners and scientists, literally insisting on a place for sustainability in the city. Expositions and associated conferences had an important educational impact in talking about sustainability, making it part of the discourses of the city (Parr 2009). Since the Forum, green themes have been reinforced by practices including signage, government campaigns and pedagogy on the city website targeting different ages and categories of civic participation. Barcelona now boasts specific projects, like the city-wide bicycle rental system borrowed from Paris and the city’s commitment, with Madrid and Seville, to establish a power-supply network for electric cars. In October 2009, the city opened a new home for the *Centre de Recursos Barcelona Sostenible* dedicated specifically to sustainability through exhibits, programs and educational outreach. Hence, one concurs with the somewhat ambivalent observation of Jonas and While that “for the most part, it has been a combination of planning, architecture and public spectacle that is the main tool for promoting sustainability in Barcelona” (2004:137).

Still, gazing at the construction proceeding apace on new highways, malls and residences for the Forum area in the early 2000s, I have worried along with other friends and colleagues that other commitments of sustainability might have been a fashion and might already be *passé*. Is ecology a challenge to be met by green spaces constructed for and since 1992 (Capel 2005)? Do constant exhibits validate green lives or trivialize them? Indeed, the forum itself included

multiple sponsors whose commitment to globalism and ecology was “challenged” by their fervent commitment to increasing consumption: Toyota, Cola Cao, Nestle, Henkel, Iberia, Telefónica, Damm and Coca Cola. In a Barcelona-based 2002 overview of the implementation of Agenda 21 in Catalonia, biologist Josep Antequera, while lauding individual gains and projects throughout Catalonia, already expressed a particular unease by how solar heating, reductions of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions or environmental reforms as well as civic involvement in planning and reform had overlooked economic or social issues:

All this process is subordinated, at times in ways that are barely compatible, to the design of a city “open to the new economy” that has been drawn up for Barcelona, bestowing on it an exemplary and model role in the world network of metropolitan areas and cities and still adhering to traditional values of economic development, tourism and quality of life (seen strictly in terms of increased individual and collective consumption). The everyday prevalence of this type of model in urban dynamics is the cause of the harmful effects (described above) that characterise the model of development of rich countries, with the additional factor of a generalised social perception of increasingly serious problems of mobility, noise, the citizens’ sense of insecurity, poverty and the difficulty of achieving a harmonious integration of inflowing migrants. (Antequera 2002:np)

Antequera’s questions prefigure questions by Catalan academics in many fields, challenging the places of growth, regulation and marginalization of peoples or problems, and the definition of the city as physical as well as governed or discursive space. Enric Tello (2004), for example, notes the grim statistics on urban sprawl for the Barcelona area that contradict the imagery of the compact city:

In the past few decades almost as much land has been urbanized as in the previous two millennia. In 1957, some 10,000 hectares had been urbanized; in 1972, this had grown to 20,000; in 1986 to some 40,000, in 1992 around 46,700 and two years later the area of urbanized land stood at about 50,000 hectares.” (225; see also Acebillo and Folch 2000; Jonas and While 2007; Parés and Sauri 2007)

These data confirm Capel’s skepticism about boundaries artificially drawn to make Barcelona a compact city without noticing new growth around it, the extension of urban commuters or even the increase in secondary homes among a comfortable and widespread middle class whose spending, in turn, helped precipitate Spain’s economic crisis since 2010.

Perhaps most telling comment on sustainable practice is the report of Richard Forman, who prepared the 21<sup>st</sup> century plan for regional land use for Catalonia (2004) but observed two years later that “No movement toward implementing the plan as a whole or establishing a trajectory for it, is presently detectable” (2008:280). In fact, questions of regional authority or the conceptual balance between sustainable growth as a limit on consumption and planning for regional production to redress balance in energy and food remain inchoate. These voices form part of a political debate dominated by a Barcelona managerial elite’s framing of sustainability as a paradigmatic issue meaningful and manageable within municipal governance so as to compete with Hamburg, Copenhagen and other European eco-cities (and to surpass Madrid). By not reading sustainability as an issue that links the city in authority and fate to issues

of nearby towns and comarcas, these elites and projects are reproducing the limits that imbued earlier monumental urban representations and celebrations and a more mythic cognitive vision of Barcelona as *cap i casal* (head and hearth) of that polity in opposition to foreign enemies like Madrid.

Given the massive public relations campaigns around sustainability, it is important to compare the framing of urban discourse here and projects like bicycling, recycling or noise control (a major theme in Barcelona environmental action in recent years) with the actions of the Network of Cities and Towns committed to Sustainability, organized under the aegis of the Diputació, an authority constituted by Catalonia's representation in the Spanish parliament ([www.sostenible.cap](http://www.sostenible.cap)). Geographer Enric Tello saw that this *xarxa* faced a series of problems in defining a move to sustainability after decades of avid growth:

After the storm, the task of constructing a polycentric system of cities that is more compact, diverse, and socially integrated will be a mammoth one. The system will have to strengthen its own retaining walls, build an efficient public transport network that provides a real alternative to the private car, and capitalize on plans that manage the demand for water and energy so as to promote the creation of new jobs that are located locally and that are sustainable with a diverse, flexible and democratically controlled economic structure. (2004:244)

Divisions continue between urban authorities and the regional/national authorities of the Generalitat de Catalunya, who have included sustainability as a major component in the 2004 Llei de Barris (Law of Neighborhoods). This law allows cities to identify particular neighborhoods as areas of degradation in need of intervention; such interventions, funded up to several million Euros over four years, must include programs of sustainability as well as inclusive access and other social goals (echoing the Forum?). Reviewing the files of such projects, it is clear that the meaning and scale of sustainability varies widely—from installing solar panels on libraries to building recycling centers to educational campaigns on various issues. As a colleague in Barcelona noted, those charged with grassroots actions in these neighborhoods do not yet understand concepts or implications of sustainability, so they work with experts and generalizable solutions at the infra-local level (Gaspar Maza, personal communication 2009). While this muddies discussion, the links of place, education and social process underscore potential dialogues of grassroots sustainability and modernity around Barcelona and the nascent AMB, even if these practices do not achieve the elegant claims of Forum 2004.

The Forum inherited and publicized sustainability rather than creating it; sustainable discourse, policy and practice have subsequently taken shape in a world of competing politics, bureaucracies and understandings (Company 1986; Maurí and Uría 1998; Boiza 2002). Yet, as Forman reminds us, what has happened does not necessarily determine what will follow:

Finally, what's the value of doing a plan for such a large complex area as an urban region? The initial post-plan phase here highlights the following benefits. A plan catalyzes new action, facilitates or accelerates ongoing action, encourages people with ideas that are consistent with it, puts new ideas on the table, highlights different priorities, and changes the frame of reference for thinking and for future plans. Taken

together, the cumulative value even at the initial phase is considerable. Shouldn't all urban regions have such plans? (2008:281)

Nor does political competition control social and cultural dialectics. Almost paradoxically, city elites and marketers have created a widespread awareness of sustainability as an arena of inter-urban political and economic competition, yet for decades they have participated simultaneously in campaigns that have highlighted local origins and Catalan identities of language, culture, and even foodways. Regional myths and practices, in fact, offer multiple foundations for sustainability based on characteristics mentioned above—restraint, balance and even sacrifice—that have been hallmarks of the hardships of Mediterranean life for millennia (Braudel 1972; McDonogh 2011). The challenge is to bring these into dialogue with the imaginations of postmodernity, vanguardism and globalization that have driven recent urban development.

Indeed, localization became timely anew in a global recession. A 2009 issue of the Generalitat's publication *Barcelona Metropolis Mediterranea* devoted to ecology, referring to dilemmas in Barcelona's post-Franco development, included an article provocatively entitled, "The crisis, catalyst of urban sustainability?" (López-Alcalá 2009). In a European (Mediterranean) crisis of consumption, debt and crippling unemployment, Barcelonins in search of sustainability not only need to think about global consumption and power, neoliberalism and postmodernity, but also must look for answers in tradition, culture and thoughtful albeit public disagreement.

## Conclusions

Given the competition among cities worldwide to enmesh global flows of capital, information, persons, and images with issues like ecological reform and planning, it is hardly surprising that the efforts of Barcelona's elites and citizens in the World Forum 2004 and subsequent development have yielded contradictions. The checkered history of past eventscapes in Barcelona forces us—and the citizens of the city—to be careful in determining how to emphasize a public commitment to sustainability that includes policies as well as practice. Indeed, as many commentators in ecology and planning have noted, sustainability has become an emotionally charged but often confusing term for analysts as well as environmentalists. Fifteen years ago, critic Donald Worster already warned,

Like most popular slogans, sustainable development begins to wear thin after a while. Although it seems to have gained a wide acceptance, it has done so by sacrificing real substance. Worse yet, the slogan may turn out to be irredeemable for environmentalist use because it may inescapably compel us to adopt a narrow economic language, standard of judgment and world view in approaching and utilizing the earth. (1995:418)

While awareness of sustainability and sustainable development has evolved, these dangers remain present, as Eric Swyngedouw observes in his initial chapter in the more recent *Sustainable Development Paradox* (2007), a collection in which Barcelona figures prominently (Jonas and While 2007; Parés and Sauri 2007).

With time for reflection on Forum 2004, materials, practices and critiques from Barcelona refract myths of sustainability and the city from different van-



tages, highlighting process between utopias and pragmatism. For more than a decade, Barcelonins of multiple backgrounds, interests and affiliations have engaged in defining and acting on environmental issues with a commitment to placemaking and a systematic zeal that claims world attention, even they have generated consistent paradoxes in practice and myth. Urban elites and image makers have touted its Mediterranean climate and abundant sunshine as foundations for energy balance; yet the metropolitan area has been plagued by drought and fires characteristic of that very climate, while many citizens regard the Mediterranean as a more everyday feature of the city, rather than a spiritual commitment. While features of compactness and density, walkability, mass transport and other hallmarks of modern sustainable urban systems have long been part of Barcelona development, these features conceal intrusive limitations on the city including underdevelopment under Franco as well as contemporary sprawl. Spain's integration into the European Union, meanwhile, underpinned an expansion of local and tourist consumption, a burgeoning property market in and around the city and other insecurities that have altered its ecological footprint profoundly and have proven unsustainable in ways that have shaken Spain and the EU itself, as youthful protestors—the *indignats* (indignant ones)—have made clear in their occupation of the Plaça de Catalunya in the summer of 2011.

These contradictions crystallized when Barcelona city fathers built on a long tradition of urban reform through global spectacles to highlight issues of sustainability for millions of invited visitors and tourists. The Universal Forum of World Cultures of 2004, following in the footsteps of other events since 1888, turned seacoast brownfields into recreational spaces with nearby residences and shopping, while showcasing its themes of diversity, sustainability and peace to a reduced, sometimes skeptical audience. It embodied efforts on the part of some urban elites—governing and intellectual—to capitalize on European urban trends in place since the Aalborg Declaration and contributed (somewhat) to both changing policies within the city and a new culture of discussion in which sustainability has continued to figure in official discourse, pedagogy, academic critique, and everyday urban life and practice.

Yet, the 2004 Forum failed to make the city sustainable, or even to clearly define what that would mean or how sustainability would be intertwined with global social justice and peace. Neither did the 1888 event make the city completely safe for the bourgeoisie, nor 1952 make Barcelona safe for the Eucharist. Even the baseball fields, rowing courses and cyclodrome of the 1992 Olympics have succumbed to deep-seated disinterest among local populations. Nevertheless, seven years after the 2004 Forum, the discussion of urban sustainability remains alive. Barcelona's citizens and government grapple with a new ecological consciousness, and calls to action. The city web page continues to have multiple active links to issues of *medi ambient* ([www.bcn.es](http://www.bcn.es)) including its official center, publications and animated images of *Barcelona verda* (green Barcelona) to train the next generation and to link this message to cultural diversity and peace. If Barcelonins have not resolved questions of sustainability, their events, sites, voices and debates maintain sustainability as a question within urban discourse and policymaking as well as the urban streetscape.

The Forum 2004 as a concrete event located in time and space suggested that sustainability entails not only statistics on a global spreadsheet but also discussions within local society and culture. Debates and actions must make sense of the past and raise questions for a future that includes planners, citizens, political parties, governments, media, tourists, entrepreneurs and immigrants

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among shifting currents of globalization and information within which 21<sup>st</sup> century Barcelona has become ever more enmeshed. This localization of global issues, education, identities and even problems of urban sustainability also suggest what Barcelona may teach us to ask as anthropologists and citizens about what to ask as well as what to do.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>In defining sustainability through this paper, I have tended to work within the general framework of the Brundtland Declaration while recognizing the challenges of more economic and ecological models of balanced energy flows and sustainable resources. Here, I have also respected myth (and its vagueness) as well as concrete practices as part of the construction of an inchoate culture of sustainability. See Swyngedouw 2004, Krueger and Gibbs, 2007; Dresner 2008; Parr 2009; Newman and Jennings 2008; Newman et al. 2009 for further discussion.

<sup>2</sup>(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oEUqo6vkjAQ>).

<sup>3</sup>([www.iniciativa.cat/noubarris/news/32499](http://www.iniciativa.cat/noubarris/news/32499). 23 March 2011).

<sup>4</sup>[www.barcelona2004.org...ic/DesenvolupamentSostenible-ManeresVeure](http://www.barcelona2004.org...ic/DesenvolupamentSostenible-ManeresVeure). posted as of November 1, 2002).

<sup>5</sup>These events, like any ecosystemic interruption, biological or political, produce unexpected results as well that become clearer over time. The 1929 Exposition, for example, generally housed by conservative buildings and the nostalgic kitsch of the Pueblo Español, also hosted Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavillion, which made modernism concrete for Spain in the world (although this building was torn down after the Exposition and then rebuilt in the 1980s AFTER the death of Franco). And even the Pueblo itself has found new roles in the postmodern city as a center for nightlife or a locus of historical reflection (Hughes 1992; Michonneau 2001).

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