



Josep Lluís Sert, Joan Baptista Subirana & Josep Torres Clavé, *Casa Bloc*, Barcelona, 1931-1936.
The renovation of *Casa Bloc* started with awareness-raising activities for neighbors. © Aitor Martínez Lorenzo, 2013.

Citizen Activation in Contemporary Collective Housing Barcelona Experiences

BY ISABEL APARICI TURRADO

This paper explores contemporary collective housing as a community resource and living heritage. The first part of the article is a conceptualization of citizen activation as a valid concept to merge actions that can transform housing into a platform to promote social cohesion. The second part lists the steps to reach citizen activation. The article highlights some examples in Barcelona: buildings where some activation activities have been stimulated and others that could start the process.

This article is structured around the contemporary collective housing as a community resource and living heritage. The last few years have seen a boom of interest in the idea of community participation in academic and city management circles. The present paper draws on the citizen activation concept to present a new way to foster effective participation. The last section focuses on some examples in Barcelona: buildings where some activation activities have been stimulated and others that could start the process.

Housing Values and its Activation

Activation¹ is the process of enhancement and diffusion of some characteristics in order to achieve a public response. When it is applied to heritage, it implies envisioning the heritage as social construction, a mechanism than can be filled with significance to serve a purpose.

Citizen activation pursues the transformation of housing as a social values booster. It considers heritage as a living thing. The process of becoming heritage sometimes brings a kind of fossilization or *fetishization* that can be avoided. Monuments, the most important examples of historic architecture, have been activated already and charged with meaning. They are included in formal speech about the city: an interpretation of space that changes in time with the dominant vision at each moment. The *Barri Gòtic* of Barcelona, refurbished in the mid-1920s with the demolition of the non-gothic elements and the construction of neo-gothic ones², is a good example. The aim was to present a comprehensive history about Barcelona to the 1929 International Exhibition visitors. It was one of the first branding strategies in the modern city.

Some housing buildings can be framed in this heritage and touristic activation, as the *Eixample art déco* buildings (*Casa Milà*, *Batlló*, *Calvet*, *Thomas*, etc.). That kind of activation has economic, political and city-marketing revenues.

Modern architecture buildings need more time to reach heritage legitimating value and activation but it could start citizen activation if all participants involved agree. This

activation will be easier and more effective if the building gives great values to the city: permeable ground floor, multiplicity of usages, diversity of dwellings favoring social mixture, community services, open interior gardens, etc.

Citizen activation can bring some values to the inhabitants of modern architecture:

- Raising self-esteem. External valorization of everyday landscape can grow a civic pride in the inhabitants of the building and also in the whole neighborhood.
- Forging personal and collective identity based on the dwelling attributes (diversity, mixture, permeability, flexibility, etc.). Place can be a positive platform of rootedness, opposite to the spatial stigma that many social housing complexes have created. Sharing sources in the identity construction stimulates social cohesion and helps breaking down barriers between different communities.
- Improving the relationship between inhabitants and their building. The interest in maintenance and exploitation of dwelling possibilities will rise.

The *Llei de Barris* (“Neighborhood Law”) of Generalitat de Catalunya³ includes social cohesion as an ultimate goal in the rehabilitation processes in degraded areas with a risk of social exclusion. Citizen activation enters into this way of thinking. Improvement of physical qualities of space and social inputs must go hand in hand.

Phases and Participants of the Activation

The activation process has different phases and participants. Each building and social context needs specific actions based in the expected results.

Appreciation

The first step to reach activation is to recognize the qualities of the building. These characteristics will be used later. State institutions have promoted architectural appreciation, especially in the form of heritage listing. It sets a statement about what the art is, or how the city is, or what items deserve (or not) to be preserved⁴.

The first decade of the 21st century in Barcelona was marked by a questioning of the city's heritage listing criteria, which ignored the industrial architecture. This is the reason why the neighborhood of *Poblenou* lost a large amount of its industrial buildings during the 1980s and 1990s, when the Olympic Village and the 22@ were built. The listing criteria were revised after neighbors and academics complained publicly.

Appreciation can appear also as a *bottom-up* process, as happened in the Walden 7 building (*Taller de Arquitectura*). The first occupants discovered in 1976 serious isolation problems on the inside and tiles detaching from the façade. In 1984 the developer asked for the declaration of the building as a ruin and for the building's demolition but the inhabitants persuaded the mayor of the city to save the building. The complete rehabilitation of the building was finished in 1994.

In the citizen activation process, the inhabitants are the protagonists. Their experience and documentation (photos, life stories, etc.) are immensely useful. The renovation of *Casa Bloc* (Sert, Subirana, Torres Clavé) started with awareness-raising activities for neighbors: some families donated original fixtures⁵ (toilets, etc.). Thanks to them, everybody can enjoy a very accurate apartment-museum reconstruction.

On the other hand, appreciation or listing is not a guarantee of the inhabitants' awareness. For instance, in 2011 the community of the Coderch & Valls building in *Passeig Joan de Borbó* (listed building) set up a banister crossing a Guinovart mural⁶ in the hall. They redressed after some critical articles in the daily press.

Signaling

Once the building values are appreciated and recognized, they have to be disseminated. Exterior signage would help to communicate them. The exterior signage on contemporary architecture in Barcelona is sparse and confusing.

Between 1899 and 1931, the City Hall of Barcelona put a plaque on the buildings awarded with the artistic merit prize. Some examples are *Casa Vicens*, *Casa Calvet*, etc.

Since 1958, the FAD association has presented its architecture award, recognized also with a plaque. Some housing buildings such as the one in Comte Borrell Street (Bohigas & Martorell) or Frégoli (Bonell) have been awarded but some plaques are missing.

During the Cultural Olympiad (1990), the association *El Quadrat d'Or* identified with plaques 150 housing buildings in the *Eixample*. Before the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, the government of the *Generalitat* erected signage on the buildings listed as BCIN (Cultural Heritage of National Interest). Most plaques are gone and new listed buildings have not had signage installed.

During the 2009 architecture week (Arquinset), the FAD association promoted an itinerary through the best contemporary housing buildings in Barcelona. They were identified with information panels, but only one of them remains in Illa Fleming (Bach & Mora).

Since 2012 *Fundación docomomo Ibérico* has set plaques on some of their listed buildings. The plaque has a QR code

to access a website with more information. In Barcelona, listed housing buildings such as Mitre (Barba Corsini) are still waiting for their plaque, which in this case is scheduled but not yet installed.

In Barcelona we also find historical plaques attached to some buildings commemorating people or events.

The conclusion is a lack of criteria and homogeneity in Barcelona's signage policy. Some heritage listed housing buildings (Coderch & Valls in *Barceloneta*) have a plaque and others do not (*Casa Espona*, Duran i Reynals; both listed in the *Fundación docomomo Ibérico* and the Catalan Heritage List).

When there is a State plaque, the information is poor and it does not allow placing the building in its social, historical or artistic context. If it is an artistic association that installed the plaque (FAD) there are too many specialized details that do not help neighbors to engage.

Signage in Milan (Italy) could be an example to follow in Barcelona. Plaques contain historical descriptions in Italian and English (envisioning touristic activation of modern architectural heritage) and a QR code to access a website with the information in 9 languages.

In Barcelona, it would be good to have more systematization of signage (plaques, buildings with signs, etc.). QR codes can help to add more information to attract not only tourists but neighbors interested in their everyday landscape. Inside the buildings old photos can be placed to help to recover memories of the place.

Diffusion

Values of modern architecture have to be communicated by the most appropriate activities in each case. Some actions involve interference in the inhabitants' everyday life: all the community has to feel comfortable with diffusion activities.

The least intrusive action is the exploitation of the building image in signs, posters, flyers, books, etc. Let us take a look at some examples. Barcelona City Hall promoted a book to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the *Montbau* neighborhood⁷ (Giráldez, López Iñigo, Subías). During the *Pla de Barris* renovation, *Barceloneta* quarter set up a website exploiting its cultural heritage. Both modern buildings of Coderch & Valls in the area were included: the one in *Passeig Joan de Borbó* and the one known as the "fishermen's house", are more modest and do not have signage. In 2011 the quarter of *Les Corts* chose a vertical garden as the main icon of its festival poster.

One of the most intrusive options is opening the building to visitors. 48h Open House Barcelona is an architecture festival. It has achieved the goal of opening some private properties to public visits for some hours⁸ one weekend a year. *Casa Bloc* can be visited: one of the apartments has been rebuilt and included as a part of DHUB (Diseny Hub Barcelona). The flat is decorated with original pieces of furniture of the 1930s; the corridors leading there show real life nowadays. Walden 7 (*Taller de Arquitectura*) is another example of a dwelling that can be visited. The association that involves all housing owners offers guided tours to groups of art, architecture or design students. Visited spaces

01 Juan Antonio Coderch and Manuel Valls, Housing in Juan Sebastian Bach, Barcelona, 1957-1960. FAD plaque, designed by Josep Maria Subirachs, on the Juan Sebastian Bach housing building. It is located in the parking entrance. © Isabel Aparici, 2013.



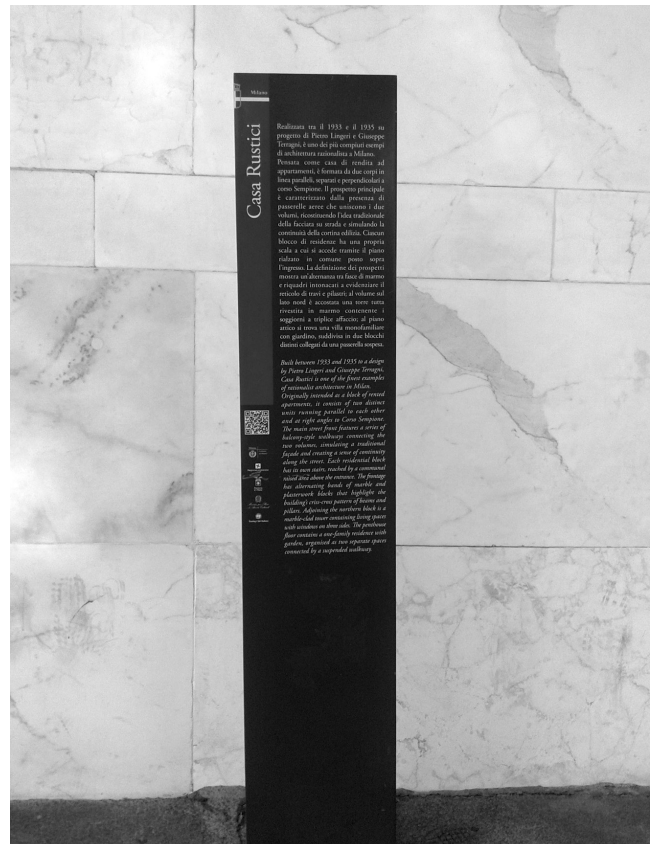
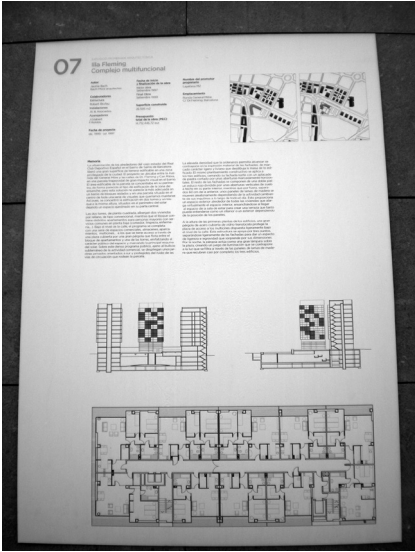
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Essays



02-03 Juan Antonio Coderch and Manuel Valls, Housing in Barceloneta, Barcelona, 1951-1954. Plaque at the main door of Coderch & Valls housing building in *Passeig Joan de Borbó*. The information on the plaque is minimal: author, year, and neighborhood. It is even impossible to know which institution paid for the plaque. © Isabel Aparici, 2013.

04-05 Jaume Bach-Gabriel Mora, Illa Fleming, Barcelona, 1995-1999. Plaques by Arquinset 2009. The information in the plaque is very specialized (floor plan, sections). The text is centered on the program and material used. © Isabel Aparici, 2013.



06-07 Giuseppe Terragni, Casa Rustici, Milan, 1933-1935. Location and text of the plaque in the Casa Rustici (Milan, Italy). The institutions involved in the signage action are clearly identified. The text provides information about the author, the context and history of the building in two languages. The QR code allows one to reach a website with data in 9 languages. © Isabel Aparici, 2013.

include the roof, corridors, stairways, hall and exterior spaces. All these examples of visitor-friendly buildings have limited and unguided visits. Unsupervised visits of private spaces are not permitted.

An option for big housing buildings would be the use of commercial spaces to locate public agencies or associations, so these spaces could be open to all neighborhoods and become small visitor-information centers of the architecture that hosts them.

Participants

Activation implies different participants from both the private and public sectors. As Prats says⁹, the activation process has to be started by those with the power to do it; willing actors are not the clue. Institutional actors focus on heritage politics and touristic activation.

The community of inhabitants of those buildings is crucial. The key point is to encourage them to participate, and listen carefully to their opinions about what events will make them feel comfortable. If visits are allowed, it is important to balance privacy and public space.

Community associations, local traders and other neighborhood agents should be included in citizen activation. It is important to encourage associational activity that includes everybody in the area. One way to do this is to allow neighbors to create a brand for the building based on memories, personal identity, etc. They would be the most effective ambassadors of the social values of their building.

The message can benefit the whole community, as it happened in Carme Street (Raval, Barcelona). Small businesses set up guided visits. They walk along the street explaining the story of some relevant buildings that are not sign-posted, such as as Gònima palace. At the end, participants feel prouder of their street.

Third sector institutions, such as the promoters of 48 Open House Barcelona, can serve as activators in the process.

Future Perspectives

The main challenge will be the incorporation of a multidisciplinary point-of-view in city management. A holistic perspective can boost all the values of architecture, especially in areas with low social interaction between citizens, with low community identification with the built environment or areas with social conflicts.

In this framework it would be useful to build up a set of indicators that can be used to assess activation success. The different steps of activation should be agreed on at the outset to reach maximum effectiveness.

Examining all the examples from Barcelona, the closest to citizen activation would be Walden 7. Maybe the initial conception of the building (city in the air devoted to a community life) has made it possible. Inhabitants needed to come together again in order to save the building. That process built up a closer relationship between Walden families, which share spaces and activities¹⁰. They refer to themselves as *waldenitas*¹¹, a “brand” that is important in their personal identity. Walden 7 allows public visits without causing

trouble; the community selflessly allows visits with the only satisfaction of proudly showing their building.

In a nutshell, city management could start citizen activation of housing as a way to improve quality of life and empower citizenship. ■

Notes

- 1 The concept *activación* is highly used in tourism. See Llorenç Prats, “Patrimonio + Turismo = ¿Desarrollo?”, *Pasos: Revista de Turismo y Patrimonio Cultural*, Vol. 1 (2), 2003, p. 127–136.
- 2 Agustín Còcola, *El Barrio Gótico de Barcelona. Planificación del Pasado e Imagen de Marca*, PhD thesis, Barcelona, Universidad de Barcelona, 2010.
- 3 Available in <http://www20.gencat.cat>.
- 4 Fernando Álvarez, “El Patrimonio en la Ciudad Contemporánea” in Josep M. Montaner, Fernando Álvarez, Zaida Muxí (Ed.), *Archivo Crítico Modelo Barcelona*, Barcelona, Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2011.
- 5 *Casa Bloc. Vivienda 1/11. Guía de Visita*, Barcelona, DHUB, 2012.
- 6 “Un Mural de Guinovart, Agredido”, *La Vanguardia*, 10/10/2011.
- 7 Carlota Giménez Compte, *Montbau 50 Anys. Un Barri de Collserola*, Barcelona, Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2011.
- 8 In 2012 Mitre building opened to public visits.
- 9 Llorenç Prats, *Etnología y Patrimonio*, Ariel, Barcelona, 1997 referred in Claudio Quintana, Rubén Stagno, “Patrimonio y Turismo: la Activación Turística Patrimonial de Purificación (Paysandú, Uruguay)”, *Pasos: Revista de Turismo y Patrimonio Cultural*, Vol 7, 2009, p. 307–319.
- 10 <http://www.walden7.com>
- 11 Documental *Waldenites*, Televisió de Catalunya, 1997 (<http://www.tv3.cat/videos/1383739/Waldenites>).

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Isabel Aparici Turrado

(b. 1976, Barcelona, Spain) BSc in Journalism, Autonomous University of Barcelona; BSc in Social and Cultural Anthropology, Barcelona University (2002); MA in Cultural Management, Barcelona University (2012). Since 2006 Isabel Aparici Turrado has collaborated in the Master Housing Laboratory for the 21st Century, in the Polytechnic University of Catalunya by teaching and planning urban routes. She has published several articles on urban culture, such as immigration or social impact of urban changes.