

# BARCELONETA TOURISTIFICATION

## Are current policy endeavors against touristification enough to restore the neighborhood's livability?

**Summary** | La Barceloneta, a neighborhood known for its proximity to the beach, is one of the most popular and touristy spots in Barcelona. Until a few decades ago, its main economic activities were fishing and harbour-related jobs, and most of its residents were marine workers. Since the democratization of the city council in 1979, several planning interventions followed to revitalize the waterfront. As in the rest of the city however, the most significant transformation in the neighborhood came with the 1992 Olympic Games, which led to major urban redevelopments, such as new parks and squares and the transformation of streets and waterfronts. From that moment onwards, the number of tourists has grown incessantly, leading to the touristification of the Barceloneta. As a result, housing prices and living costs in the neighborhood have significantly increased, while crowding public spaces with short-term visitors and affecting its overall livability. Faced with gentrification and social disintegration, neighborhood groups have mobilized against mass tourism, and reclaiming their rights to decent housing and living conditions. In response, in 2017 the City of Barcelona introduced the so-called Special Urban Plan for Tourist Housing, which put a stop to the further expansion of tourist accommodations in Barcelona, and Barceloneta in particular. Yet concerns over touristification in Barceloneta and the rest of the city remain.

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Figure 1. La Barceloneta before and after the urban transformation for the 1992 Summer Olympic Games.

## Early remodeling and historical struggles in Barceloneta

The Barceloneta is a low-rise, densely populated coastal neighborhood, and one of the most popular destinations for tourists in Barcelona. Its location is highly accessible for its proximity to the central district of the city, and the old town (Ciutat Vella) in particular. Barceloneta literally means “little Barcelona” in Catalan, and indeed locals still refer to their neighborhood as a village within the city. The neighborhood dates back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century when the land was reclaimed to build the harbour. In 1718, Captain-General Marquis of Castel-Rodrigo initiated the construction of housing in the neighborhood for the many displaced citizens of La Ribera district whose houses had been demolished. Given its location close to the sea, the main activities were related to fishing and the port at least until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

The government’s decision to host the 1992 Olympic Games led to major urban transformations that began taking shape in 1986. The objective was to convert Barcelona’s remaining urban industrial landscape into one for cultural, leisure and touristic activities. The creation of the Passeig Maritim, the 1.25 km seafront boardwalk is often seen as one of the emblematic changes and a valuable asset for Barceloneta that allowed residents and tourists to walk, cycle and enjoy the maritime landscape. This regeneration, along with others, however, eventually catapulted Barcelona onto the radar of global tourist attractions, and triggered an unprecedented increase in the number of visitors, reaching 30 million in 2019.

In addition, Barceloneta had little in the way of large, luxury housing units (compared to the Eixample, for example). Most of the dwellings were and still are small, relatively narrow and without elevators. As a way of addressing this, in 2007 the municipality approved a plan to equip residences with elevators. But the execution of the plan would have led to the demolition of up to 25% of the already dwindling stock of fishermen’s dwellings, putting up to 1,500 families (20% of the neighborhood) at risk of displacement. Certainly, this remodeling would have made the neighborhood even more attractive for predatory real estate developers and exacerbated the exclusion of the working-class. In response, neighborhood associations mobilized against the plan, largely led by the *Miles de Viviendas* squat, the *L’Òstia* neighborhood association, and the *Platform in the Defense of the Barceloneta*. Their protests resulted in success and the plan was finally retracted.

## Touristification and its discontents

In 2009, the 5-star luxury Hotel W Barcelona was constructed right on the seafront amidst strong civil resistance. The building was erected despite prohibitions to building within 100 meters from the sea in the Spanish Coastal Law. Likewise, the process of acquiring the public land, formerly property of the Port Authority of Barcelona, was not transparent, to say the least. Since then, the seafront space offered to luxury yachts in Ciutat Vella has been also growing, exemplified by the emblematic inauguration of the OneOcean Port Vell marina complex.

Over the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, touristic pressure in the neighborhood has gradually increased. Now, Barceloneta is comprised of countless tourist apartments, restaurants, clubs and bars, water recreation facilities, an aquarium and museums of high touristic appeal. The excessive presence of tourists has also generated noise disturbances, public drunkenness, and an increased amount of litter. A major issue is gentrification and broader concerns for housing affordability. The rise of home-sharing platforms such as Airbnb has substantially contributed to this phenomenon. Research has demonstrated that 65.5% of Ciutat Vella residents perceive tourist accommodation as excessive and four out of five residents believe visitors are driving up prices in Barcelona, especially in the accommodation and hospitality sectors (Ortiz and Algueró 2019).

The exponential growth of tourism in the city, and Barceloneta in particular, has been resisted by neighborhood groups. The civil platform providing the most extensive critique of the touristification processes and model of Barcelona is the “Assamblea de Barris per Decreixement Turístic” (Assembly of Neighborhoods for Touristic Degrowth, ADBT), which gathers a diverse range of citizens and associations that raise awareness and organize public actions to contest mass tourism in Barcelona.

Before the change of municipal direction in 2015 and the election of progressive mayor Ada Colau, municipality politics had been oriented towards stimulating the exponential growth of tourism in the city. As of 2015 however, a number of measures were passed to ‘tame down tourism’, including: redirecting funds from tourist taxes, a one-year ban for new tourist accommodations, and stricter rules and controls for existing tourist accommodations. Members of ADBT, however, find these measures insufficient to address the breadth of the tourist massification problem in Barceloneta.

Finally, and as a means of countering the impersonal and crowded character of public space associated with the touristification of Barceloneta, neighborhood groups have mobilized to create micro- alternatives such as ‘green refuges’. The Sardineta community garden is one example. In 2015, neighborhood associations identified an unused lot of public land and requested permission to use it for gardening (La Sardineta, 2020) which led to the creation of a green space managed by the locals.

Although the Barceloneta has benefitted from extensive public space remodeling and improved access to the waterfront, it has also paid the price for its success in the form of mass tourism and its negative social and environmental impacts. While the COVID-19 pandemic has reduced touristic use and provided more opportunity for Barcelona residents to access the waterfront, it also underscores the need to shift away from a tourism-driven development model and implement bold housing rights policies. The combined health, economic, and climate crises also encourage a greater visibilization and protection of citizen initiatives that are creating new public spaces in Barceloneta and fighting for a different economic and social basis for the future of the neighborhood.

## Links

**Hort Comunitari de la Sardineta:** A community garden created and organized by several neighborhood associations.

Website: <https://lasardinetadelabarceloneta.wordpress.com/hort/>

Email: [gruplasardineta@gmail.com](mailto:gruplasardineta@gmail.com)

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/lasardinetabcneta/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/LaSardineta/>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/LaSardineta/>

**Masala:** A self-managed neighborhood newspaper that writes about immigrant struggles, urban and social conflicts.

Website: <https://masala.cat/barri/barceloneta/>

Email: [masala@ravalnet.org](mailto:masala@ravalnet.org)

Instagram: [https://www.instagram.com/revista\\_masala/](https://www.instagram.com/revista_masala/)

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/masalarevista>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/masalacv>

**La Barceloneta Rebel:** a neighborhood association with the common goal of defending their neighborhood.

Website: <https://labarcelonetarebel.wordpress.com/>

Email: [pdefensabarceloneta@yahoo.es](mailto:pdefensabarceloneta@yahoo.es)

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/LaBarcelonetaRebel/>

**La Barceloneta Diu Prou** [Barceloneta says enough]: A collective created by and for neighbors to work on the struggles within the, as they call it “the best neighborhood in the world”.

Facebook group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1713216155579605>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/bcnetadiuprou>



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