

# Unlearning from Barcelona – In-between fiction and reality

Jon Etxaide

## The City

A subtle movement is enough to wake me up. As I open my eyes to the sun coming through the tiny window resting above my head, I instantly feel the need to smell the soft summer breeze that mixes with the ocean. I go out onto the deck and take a look at the land in front of me; workers hum around and seagulls greet the Mediterranean sun, slowly cruising amidst the huge cranes that guard the docks. Suddenly I realize: today we finally reached Barcelona! I've been expecting to come back here for years, ever since I first visited the city with my parents, as a child. I still have a vague memory of the city. If I close my eyes, I'm still able to recall unorganized images of the Ramblas, the artists on the streets, that breathtaking cathedral... I eventually get off the ship amongst an excited crowd of countless visitors, all raising their heads to take the city in. For a moment, I catch a glimpse of the Sagrada Familia! We've been told that there will not be enough time to visit it, what saddens me deeply. Hopefully, I will at least be able to purchase the miniature of it. We finally stand on solid ground and everybody spreads out in every direction. I put on my hat and start walking with a fully charged camera on my hands.

"The statue of Christophorus Columbus!" someone shouts. I remember being told that he was pointing to

America though I would swear that America is in the opposite direction... I go on walking up the crowded Ramblas. A couple of steps ahead, a group of visitors follows a tall woman who explains the history of the city with a strong Spanish accent. I was offered a place in one of those groups but they are simply not for me, I rather go on my own and mix in with the local life. I keep walking up, passing by a constant of souvenir shops and all-over-the-world restaurants.

Finally, I arrive at the Boqueria market. Here you see the vibrant Barcelona come to life: the sea-like smell of the fish stalls, the color explosion of the fruit stores. There is no place like this market, if you really want to feel the local life of the city. As I continue my journey I try to observe and catch every bit of my surroundings. I see people taking pictures with the stunning Gaudí buildings, which show off their bright colors and sinuous forms. Far in the distance, I rest my eyes on the gothic quarter. As I cross its streets, I gently touch the walls and it seems like I'm reading a history book. I picture it in my head, centuries ago, stone after stone how all of this architecture was raised from the ground. Then I find myself in front of the cathedral and I just stand there in amazement, taking my photographs.

I've been so absorbed by the city that I completely lost the notion of time. We have to start going back al-

ready. I didn't have time to have a walk through Paseo de Gracia! Well, I guess that leaves a reasonable enough excuse to come back. I make my way to where we have docked, crossing the Ramblas once again. I catch some of my fellow ship companions taking their last selfies and purchasing the last souvenirs. Shortly before entering the ship, I turn around to see this stunning city for one last time. Something catches my attention: I always thought the Montjuic hill was on the opposite side. Well, never mind.

### The City!

These previous lines expose nothing more than a short experience of the city center of Barcelona, but not the Barcelona one might have in mind though. It all happens in “Barcelona!”, a full size copy of the ramblas, built in the beginning of the XXI century as a response to the challenges the city was facing.

The unsustainable situation created by mass tourism and the impossibility of simply forbidding it, led to the point where the city council saw the creation of a replica of the Ramblas, on the periphery of Barcelona, as the best solution for the problem. It was an attempt to reduce the amount of visitors to Barcelona's city center in order to calm down the increasing protest and riots performed by the local inhabitants of the old town district whilst conserving the tourism related businesses that had meanwhile become vital for the city's economy.

The peripheral area of zona Franca, on the other side of the Montjuic hill, was the place chosen for this ambitious project named “Barcelona!”. The strategic situation of this area, with direct connection to the city harbor as well as proximity to el Prat airport and the Fira exhibition center made it a perfect choice. The new city was projected taking the Barcelona ramblas as the main spine. Trying to replicate as much as possible the main landmarks and architecture of the original city, changing them, if necessary, to provide an easier experience of the improved Barcelona. Changes that, with

time, became imperceptible for the millions of tourist which visit the new city every year.

Private investment was a crucial factor for the success of the new development. It was an ideal opportunity for the hotel industry to open new hotels and businesses directed to tourism. It was as well an opportunity for the local economy like the boquería market, the shops around the ramblas or the hotels and apartments to extend their business into an attractive and even more successful new location.

What in the beginning was intended to be just a tool to decrease the amount of tourist in the old town, happened to become a way more attractive spot for tourism than the original and decayed city center of Barcelona, to the point where it became the main source of Barcelona's financial income.

### In-between

In 2016, Barcelona beat its record of tourists arriving by cruises to the city: nearly 30.000 tourists in one day, more than 2 million tourists over the course of the year. The synchronized arrival of visitors and the prearranged city routes lead to the collapse of most touristic areas of the city. This fact, linked to the amount of hotels and apartments in the city, as well as new ways of unregulated renting, are transforming the local life. The unsustainable rise of touristic apartments are disproportionately increasing long time rentals' prices are forcing locals to move out of the core of the city. As a soft response, in March 2017 the Barcelona council presented an international competition to rethink the Ramblas with the aim of regaining it for the local community.<sup>1</sup>

This problem is not only affecting Barcelona; other cities like Venice, Rome or Lisbon are suffering similar transformations. Some experts already talk about the “heritagization” of the cities.<sup>2</sup> The system makes a huge effort to preserve historical buildings and cultural heritage, what does not seem wrong as an approach. However, in the process of protecting these monuments, it

<sup>1</sup> <http://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/turisme/en/noticia/international-contest-to-re-gain-la-rambla-for-local-residents>.

<sup>2</sup> From the book “If Venice dies” Salvatore Settis 2016.

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<sup>3</sup> Interesting webdoc about the invention of the gothic quarter, pretext and consequences <http://www.farse-lona.com/en>

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<sup>4</sup> "BCN World" or "Hard Rock entertainment world" are recent examples of entertainment complex planned on the coast of Salou, 40 minutes away from Barcelona.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/gallery/2014/oct/22/venice-china-dalian-copy-canals-palaces-gondoliers>

forgets that these buildings are not dead, they are still used and inhabited by the citizens of these cities. Citizens tend to be forgotten, tend to be pushed away, resulting in a city composed by monuments and the necessary infrastructure for their monetization. And while buildings do not talk, they are the tellers of history and, more often than one might think, they lie.

Most people who visit the gothic quarter in Barcelona may think that its architecture is, as the name says, gothic. In reality, most of the representative "gothic" architecture in the city center dates from the end of the XIX century. This sudden sprout of the Gothic style has nothing of casual or innocent. Since the birth of the nation state, authorities from different countries had made use of architectural styles to legitimize and reinforce national identities. In the late XIX century, the rise of nationalism and the purpose of creating a national feeling or identity promoted the reconstruction of the historical parts of Barcelona. The ruling class of the catalan bourgeoisie created the then new Gothic Barcelona. The old town was revamped by adding new gothic style ornamentation to the existing buildings' facades, completely altering its original appearance to the exterior whilst keeping their original structure. The aim was not to rebuild the decayed city as it was in its original state, but to transform it into an idealized mediterranean capital, even if they needed to rewrite history in order to do so.<sup>3</sup>

This designed reconstruction helped to calm and control the discontent of the working class by giving them a reason to believe in a common national feeling, but it also greatly influenced the birth of Barcelona as a prime touristic destination. The city was presented as an attractive destination for high class society, using its architecture, cultural and geographic settings as strong selling points. It might as well be seen as the first attempt to market this city as a product. A successful attempt, as the Barcelona brand still lasts and it has been the main political tool for the increasement of mass tourism and private investment during the last 20 years.

As elsewhere, in Barcelona architecture has been used to convey a selected aspect of a city's identity, dissolving something that could be interpreted as fake into the common imaginary, to the point when most locals do not know that this charismatic gothic quarter is not as gothic as they think.

This historic precedent seems to validate the idea of creating a copy of Barcelona, and it is not alone. There have recently been proposals to create new "amusement cities" in the periphery of Barcelona.<sup>4</sup> Could we then actually arrive to a point where the difference between the original city and the copy becomes blurry? One might argue that Authenticity will always be an antidote against this. Well, it might not be as effective as it might sound. For instance, in China and Japan, blunt copies of western cities like Paris, Venice or the alpine village of Hallstatt are being built, going so far as to replicate the icons and monuments of the original cities.<sup>5</sup> Despite being copies, these cities are visited every year by thousands of tourists, what seems to be enough to validate them as cities in their own right. Authenticity does not seem to be a requirement for the enjoyment of the visitor, as formal and folcloric features successfully fulfill its role in the current interpretation of a city as a consumption good.

With this premises, it is not outrageous to think that Barcelona could arrive to understand a twisted copy of itself as the real city, as we have seen something similar happening in the late XIX century with the gothic quarter. From veneer architecture to veneer urbanism, it would, at the end, be just a matter of scale. This leap has recently been taken with results that are completely aligned with the current ideas of successful city production, with a complete disregard for authenticity and identity. And if it is clear that fiction in architecture has been constantly used as a tool to filter history on the way to the creation of new realities and identities, at this moment, it seems crucial to me to preserve the local identity of the city and make it compatible with the evolving

roles a city has to currently perform. Building a copy is just a way of doing so... After all, a city without citizens is already a hollowed-out copy of itself.

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