# From Streets to Politics

*The Influence of
Radical Legacies on Barcelona's
Multi-level Governance*

**Barcelona Study Trip Report   2024**

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- The Office of the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG)
- The Human Rights Department of the City Council of Barcelona
- Can Batlló

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# Introduction

Barcelona is a city with a rich legacy of collective organizing. This tradition traces its roots to the era of resistance against Franco's dictatorship. It gained momentum during the 15M or Indignados movement of 2011, a response to the national government's austerity measures amidst the economic recession, and peaked again in 2015 when Ada Colau, the leader of the anti-eviction movement, was elected as the mayor of Barcelona.

This radicalism internalized in the city's personality, however, remained an abstraction until we actually witnessed its tangible impact on Barcelona's governance landscape in our exchanges with professionals, citizens, and scholars during our study trip in January 2024. Progressive movements, radicalism, human rights, grassroots activism, community engagement – these notions kept popping out in the narration of diverse actors of governance. Therefore, this article is formulated around the question: **How do the traditions of activism and radical movements influence urban governance in Barcelona?**

This report will present four cases that covering multiple levels of governance:

1. the case of Can Batlló, where a community space is born as the direct outcome of a social movement;
2. the participatory planning of public spaces, in which citizens interact with the authorities;
3. the Human Rights Department of the Barcelona City Council, which sees the radicalism as a tool to balance political discontinuity; and
4. the case of an international organization, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), who uses the distinct characteristics of Barcelona to promote municipal governance on the global stage.

# 1. Local Level Governance: Citizen self-organization



*Figure 1. Protest in Can Batlló asking for justice in property use*

On the last day of our study trip, we visited a community house in the drizzling rains of Barcelona. In the outskirts of Barcelona lies a testament to the power of community solidarity and grassroots activism: Can Batlló. This historical site, once a bustling privately-owned textile company from 1880 to 1964, served as a cornerstone of the working-class identity in the region. In its prime days, Can Batlló employed over 4000 workers, and these individuals participated lively in shaping the cultural and social dynamics of the surrounding neighborhoods.

However, as urban redevelopment and economic turmoil loomed, Can Batlló was placed at a crossroads. In 2006, the municipal authorities and the property owner proposed to repurpose the site into more profitable housing units, and the housing bubble followed quickly in 2008. Conflicting interest groups including workers and residents, and, in some cases, worker-and-residents have stood together to fight against encroachment on their community spaces.

In response to the pressure with top-down decision-making, community mobilization

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*Figure 2. Bar area of Can Batlló*



*Figure 3. Library of Can Batlló*

emerged. In the spring of 2011, a coalition of residents, workers, and activists united under a common cause: to reclaim Can Batlló as a public asset. With the threat of occupation, the municipality was compelled to negotiate with the community, and soon reached an agreement for property right transfer of the largest site complex to the community hands.

This triumph wasn't merely about taking physical space but symbolized the community autonomy and self-determination over profit-driven agendas imposed by municipalities. Within one month of its opening, the community rallied to establish a public library operated by volunteers from the place, with over 25,000 books donated by the community. This is a space created by the people and for the people.

Moreover, the historical trajectory of Can Batlló reveals the complex interplay of property rights, citizen rights, and spatial justice.

By resisting the commodification of their neighborhoods and asserting their right to community space, workers and residents of Can Batlló have redefined the narrative of urban development through self-organizing in a participatory approach. Through their solidarity, they have not only reclaimed the space, but also demonstrated a perfect example for us to reimagine the very essence of community and belonging in modern Barcelona.

# 2. Local Level Governance: Citizens and Authorities

In contexts where the exchange and confrontations between individuals and authorities are multifaceted, adopting participatory approaches to investigate their relationship from dynamics of various parks and on-site observations was necessary and full of fun. This part of the article will focus on one such site: a park and its surrounding area in Ciutat Vella, the historical heart of the city.

Hidden in the labyrinthine alleys and streets, this park is reserved exclusively for children from the adjacent elementary school during specific daytime periods. While fostering a sense of safety and order, the presence of surrounding fences subtly accentuated divisions within the urban fabric, further leading us to question the risk of underlying spatial segregation. In addition, it's worth noting that the evolving policies and local initiatives have conditioned the flux for the dynamics of this space, highlighting the importance of maintenance and adaptation and constant reflexivity on the balance between safety and inclusivity.

Adjacent to this neatly curated park, stands a contrast between the remnants of ancient archaeological sites and informal settlements, pitching the defiance towards conventional regulations and laws. The urban environment has manifested itself on a dual identity of divergent architectural intentions and the realities of informal appropriation.



*Figure 4. Protected park for children at Ciutat Vella*

*Figure 5&6. Informal settlements adjacent to archaeological protected sites at Ciutat Vella*

Despite attempts to regulate and protect space, the informal settlers had carved out their own place, challenging traditional notions of ownership and use. This juxtaposition illustrated the evolving relationship between urban regulations and the lived experiences of marginalized communities, calling for the need of a more nuanced understanding of spatial dynamics.

Our immersion into these urban spaces through a participatory lens provided invaluable insights into the multifaceted nature of urban life. By engaging directly with the environments and inhabitants, we gained a deeper appreciation for the mutual shaping relationship between users and urban regulations. Complexities inherent in urban governance necessitates the importance of inclusive decision-making processes through participatory approaches, so that the layers of socio-cultural or political dynamics at plan on the urban stage could generate more equitable and responsive urban policies and interventions.

# 3. Local Level Governance: Local Authority



*Figure 7. The slogan "LGBTI-phobia you are not welcome"*
*at the entrance of the Barcelona City Council Office*

As the formal governance actor, the local authority plays an important role in local-level governance and public administration in the city. In terms of human rights, the Human Rights Department of the City Council works for a diverse and intercultural city model where everyone has real and effective access to human rights under equal conditions.[1] It provides several services, including anti-discrimination actions, legal advice, training, protection, and collaboration with NGOs.

With the precious legacy of the radical movement, the Human Rights Department integrates radical democracy into its work and responds to the reorganization and changes after the city's election in 2023. The Department is currently putting in the effort to make Barcelona "a city of Human Rights." This specific model emphasizes the participation of citizens and dialogues between public organizations and the public in the policy-making process, promoting the networks of neighborhoods or areas.[2] In order to achieve the ambitious goal, the department has taken a series of actions to train citizens, improve the political mechanism, and support campaigns.[3]

One of the Department's key concerns is anti-discrimination. Discrimination toward ethnicity, gender, and religion remains severe in Barcelona, which negatively affects the human rights of the citizens. The Department held publicity and awareness-raising events and conferences as well as provided help for those who were discriminated against, combating discrimination and hate speech. It also offered anti-discrimination training to civil servants, communities, and private enterprises.

Responding to a right-wing government after the city's election in 2023, the Human Rights Department aims to amplify the notion of human rights as the pillar of democracy and an opportunity to improve their works.

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[1] https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/dretsidiversitat/en/about-us

[2] https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/dretsidiversitat/sites/default/files/WEB_Manual_DDHH_A5_ENG.pdf

[3] https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/dretsidiversitat/en/barcelona-city-of-rights/we-are-implementing-right-city-well-human-rights-citizenship

# 4. International Level Governance: Partnership with NGOs and Other Cities



*Figure 8. A game developed by UCLG as a tool to share the knowledge of city governance*

Barcelona is not only an outstanding city on the national level but also an international reference regarding urban governance and radical movements. It shares experiences and influences with cities all over the world. The City Council and organizations within Barcelona cooperate closely with international organizations to improve the city's global position. United Cities and Local Governments Committee (UCLG), located in Barcelona, maintains collaboration with governmental organizations and promotes social inclusion, participatory democracy, and human rights across the world. It is an international platform for local or regional governments to collaborate and communicate, introducing ideas and policies across cities. Apart from formal conferences and research reports, it provides interesting games during learning forums and online courses at the same time.

The City Council of Barcelona collaborates with UCLG in terms of communication with other cities, sharing technical practices, and initiating campaigns together. Most recently, at the IOPD 2023 Conference, the Director of the Directorate of Citizens' Rights Services presented their strategies, structures, services, and mechanisms aimed at making racism and its impact visible, combating it, transforming local culture, and supporting victims. The main point was that the participation of civil society was integrated into the policy-making process to improve the implementation of anti-racist policies.[4] Not only in the anti-discrimination field, UCLG presents this city as an example of radical and participatory democracy from the general governance perspective. Meanwhile, anti-discrimination experiences from cities like Rio and Salvador were shared with others, which facilitated the discussion with the efforts of UCLG.

Nowadays, the role of cities in governance is increasingly critical both within the states and in the world. With the organization connecting cities like UCLG, cutting-edge governance experiences can be shared.



*Figure 9. The office of UCLG*

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[4] https://www.uclg-cisdp.org/en/news/enhancing-voice-antiracist-cities-rio-barcelona-and-salvador-share-their-local-experiences

# Conclusion

The notion of the "right to the city" put forward by Henry Lefebvre in 1967 has been referenced everywhere in the urban fields. It highlights the collectivity that all the inhabitants and users of a city form to shape the future of urban space. We find the landscape of multi-level governance in Barcelona aligning with this vision to some extent, and radicalism has gradually been internalized in this landscape.

This report tries to demonstrate this picture where the traditions of radicalism have been actively mobilized by various parties that take part in urban politics. We presented four cases of city governance where the traditions of radicalism and citizen participation are present as different conceptual tools that aid the different agendas of the specific stakeholders.

First and importantly, community self-organizing and active engagement in public space through participatory approaches is vital in (re)shaping the dynamics between citizens and urban entities. Through initiatives like those in Can Batlló and public squares in Barcelona, communities assert their autonomy, challenging top-down decision-making and advocating for their collective interests. By reclaiming and repurposing public spaces, urban residents not only interact with the physical landscape of their living environments but also foster a sense of belonging, participation and social cohesion through collective efforts with their communities.

As for the role of the Human Rights Department of the City Council, the traditions of radicalism, and more specifically, the notion of "human rights" are valued as a tool to stabilize and continue their previous accomplishment and future work that might be at the risk of policy discontinuity and the rise of right-wing power. Finally, on an international level, UCLG serves as a platform that connects cities and an amplifier to share Barcelona's good practices with the world, especially with smaller cities with fewer resources. The image of a radical Barcelona that organizations like UCLG have created on a global stage has also made the traditions of radicalism more powerful locally.

Through these cases, we have shown that the traditions of activism and radicalism heavily influenced the way that Barcelona is governed, both on a local and an international level. At the same time, the current governance landscape also reinforces the bonding of civil society and strengthens the image of Barcelona as a radical city.

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