Urban Planning and Governance: Is there a Barcelona Model?

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Abstract Barcelona has become well known in Europe for its ambitious programmes of planning and urban regeneration, undertaken under the leadership of the city council. It has been claimed that a ‘Barcelona model’ of planning has been formed, whether in local urban planning, or in overall city strategic planning, or both, and with this a distinctive approach to urban governance. Whilst some of the dimensions of change have been fully described, they have been analysed rather less; this applies particularly to the period after 1992. Four somewhat distinct forms of planning are examined (‘normal’ urban planning, strategic planning, infrastructure planning and metropolitan regional planning). An assessment is made as to how far these have formed a coherent whole, and whether this has been problematic for how the development of the city is being guided.

Introduction

Did Barcelona create a model of urban planning and urban governance in the 1980s and 1990s? The question is worth examining, on several levels. Most straightforwardly, the city is much visited and much discussed, certainly by many European students of planning/urbanism. Some consideration as to whether a more or less coherent model of action has been developed is thus interesting in itself—whether or not that is placed in wider debates.

But those wider debates do exist. In planning, the future of ‘strategic spatial planning’ has been on the agenda again for several years (Healey et al., 1997). In discussion of urban governance in the UK, Barcelona has been treated by some as a model of good practice, particularly in the New Labour grouping seeking reform of local government (for example via directly elected mayors). (The fact that Barcelona has never had a directly elected mayor—it has the UK system—is disregarded, as is typical in cross-cultural learning or mislearning). The city is perhaps seen as a model for a ‘modernized’ social democracy, and as a leader in the practice of trying to adapt to the pressures or opportunities of globalization. Whilst the planning and governance lines of debate are not tightly connected, generally flowing along separate professional, disciplinary or political channels, the reality is that planning in Barcelona has been related to the dynamic of policy development on regeneration, economic promotion and governance processes. A view from the city, looking across the board at policy initiatives, is therefore needed to relate to these two debates, as well as to others which deal with more specific dimensions (not dealt with here—public space, heritage, social polarization or exclusion, culture/leisure/tourism, urban sus-
taintability, to name a few). Here I propose to provide such an overview, concentrating particularly on the post-1992 years.

The survey cannot benefit from many other considerations from related perspectives—I am only aware of one specific treatment, from an architectural profession standpoint, based on a Paris seminar (Direction générale de l’urbanisme, 1998). This seminar was organized by the French Ministry of Planning and Housing, an example of international interest in the Barcelona experience. It is notable that no such wide-ranging event has been organized in the UK, despite the extensive anecdotal reference to the city. Parts of the book by Borja & Castells (1997) do, however, include a considered reflection on the city’s experience, by a leading actor. The survey will look successively at the processes of planning, the ideas or theories drawn on and some of the achievements and problems which may be identified. The emphasis will be far more on planning than on governance more broadly, but the links to governance will be drawn out explicitly towards the end. The final sections will provide some conclusions on the nature of the ‘Barcelona model’.

I am not undertaking here ‘comparative analysis’ of the kind which sets up a general framework and then seeks to place Barcelona (or other cities) within that. Here the more modest aim is to seek to understand what has been happening in Barcelona. Given the widespread discussion of the city’s experience, that seems to be an essential starting point before any more ambitious comparison across European planning and governance, although I will engage briefly with some broader advocacy of planning models.

**Processes of Planning and Governance**

The key public agencies have not changed, in their essentials, since the abolition of the Metropolitan Corporation in 1987 (see Table 1). So governmental forms, at least, have not been new parts of a transformed model. The city council of Barcelona remains powerful, despite its declining population. Its solid tax base and symbolic force as capital of Catalonia give it the potential and continual incentive for metropolitan leadership. The planning functions of the council are spread between at least three ‘plenary council commissions’ (housing and land policy, sustainability and urban ecology, and infrastructure and urbanism), the approximate equivalent of British council committees, although much daily executive power rests within the 10 districts and bigger political questions are generally dealt with by the mayor and the five deputy mayors.

The city council controls to a large degree the post-1987 metropolitan bodies: the agency for water and environment (mainly water supply and treatment), the municipalities association (Mancomunitat de Municipis, for planning cooperation) and the metropolitan transport agency, coordinating buses and taxis. The latter has, however, since 1998, been part of the Metropolitan Transport Authority, including also the regional government and RENFE, the national rail corporation. This is intended to be a step towards a coordinated transport system for the metropolitan region. The socialists have controlled the city council and the metropolitan bodies from 1979 to the present, with or without the support of the (ex) Communists and other left-of-centre groups.

The second key public agency is the Generalitat, the government of the autonomous community (region) of Catalonia. It has formal planning powers, both in regional planning and as supervisor of municipal planning, through the
### Table 1. Levels of government and administration in Catalonia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Number of units in Catalonia</th>
<th>Dates and form of operation</th>
<th>Planning powers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>Via offices of ministries</td>
<td>Democratic elections from 1977</td>
<td>Making of laws, influence via investment powers of ministry (MOPTMA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomous community</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>From 1977, democratically elected from 1980</td>
<td>Making of laws, steering through regional planning and infrastructure investment, and supervision of local planning legality and performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Generalitat)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Province</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Indirect democratic representation since 1979</td>
<td>Investment coordination, and support for innovation for smaller municipalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comarca (county)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>From 1987</td>
<td>Still limited and advisory, part replacing provinces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan area</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Barcelona Metropolitan Corporation 1974-1987</td>
<td>Since 1987 mainly advisory and supportive of effects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(27 municipalities around Barcelona)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Association of Municipalities and other bodies 1987 on</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipality</td>
<td>943</td>
<td>Democratically elected from 1979</td>
<td>Prime plan-making and control powers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: MOPTMA, Ministry of Public Works, Transport and Environment

Commission of Urbanism—as specified by Catalonia’s own planning law. The commission, as advised by Joan Antoni Solans, the director of urban planning of the Generalitat, is particularly alert to the proper implementation of the Pla General Metropolità (PGM), the 1976 plan for the 27 metropolitan municipalities, whose preparation was directed by Solans.

In addition the Generalitat possesses a range of other regulatory and implementation powers, including that specified by the Llei de Comerç, licensing new retail provision (thus all new shopping centres have to be approved by the Generalitat). It regulates many of the motorway concessions in Catalonia, owns part of the rail network near Barcelona, directs the Institut Català del Sol (land development agency) and is responsible for public housing, education and health. Whilst some of these functions are less developed in the Barcelona metropolitan region, given the weight of the municipalities there (the land agency operates more in the rest of Catalonia), it is the Generalitat that has been responsible since 1987 for preparing a plan for the metropolitan region, of 163 municipalities, the ‘real’ region of the city (see Figure 1 for the relation of the city
Figure 1. Catalonia, the Barcelona metropolitan region and the Barcelona urban core. Source: Ajuntament de Barcelona (Barcelona Regional) (2000).
and metropolitan region). A draft of this plan was presented for expert consideration in 1998. The Generalitat has significant financial autonomy from the central government, especially since it was able to extract an agreement to obtaining automatically 30% (up from 15%) of income tax from the region, in 1997. The centre-right Catalanist coalition, Convergencia i Unió, has controlled the Generalitat since 1980.

The central government retains significant powers affecting the planning and development of the Barcelona region. Beyond setting certain framework laws (for land and planning, for example), it controls major infrastructure spending, for much of the main road and motorway network, for all long-distance and high-speed trains, and for most local train services. Despite Catalonia’s gradual escape from full tax dependence, the central government still allocates the majority of public funds and also retains control of the port of Barcelona and of the airport. Its role has varied with the geometry of party control at the three levels, always conservative Catalan nationalist (CiU) at the level of Catalonia, but with the Madrid governments depending on CiU votes from 1993 on, first the socialists, then from 1996 the conservative Partido Popular. The socialist city council has lost leverage since the 1996 change of control in Madrid. ‘Governance’ in the city, as in Spain generally, is in large part a function of these formal governmental tiers, subject only to creeping, if real, more informal processes.

I am not going to emphasize here the dimensions of party conflict which have existed continuously since the late 1970s. Nor will the stress be on the individual politicians involved, even though some kind of story can certainly be told in terms of the relations and ambitions of the most well known ones, Pasqual Maragall (mayor of Barcelona) and Jordi Pujol (president of Catalonia). This is not due to a wish to downplay the importance of party-political processes. But spatial planning has had multiple drivers, and the above axes of division are only part of these, though vital. Politics comes in also through the drives of professionals and the pressure of economic and social interests.

This institutional landscape has, however, been populated by a series of planning or steering activities in the last 10 years. These have shown a certain evolution of approaches, but also a certain adherence to the ‘Olympics approach’, which had so much success (apparently) in the 1980s. For the purposes of initial description, they may be divided into four types: ‘normal’ urban planning, strategic planning, infrastructure planning, and regional/metropolitan planning. Table 2 summarizes the planning instruments which have been developed under these headings. These will be introduced separately, before a discussion of their origins, connections and significance. This will be followed by a broader discussion of urban governance. What emerges is a package of urban planning and governance with only a certain degree of overall coherence. For reasons of space I will assume a degree of knowledge about the city and its planning before 1992, as I and others have discussed this elsewhere (Marshall, 1996; McNeill, 1999).

‘Normal’ Urban Planning

The Olympics initiatives, above all that of the Olympic village, set off a style of planning which has continued to the present. It is a style focused on the redevelopment of brownfield, normally industrial, land. As in the case of the Olympic projects, this planning has sat only loosely within the framing of the
Table 2. Kinds of planning and main plans in the Barcelona region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Land-use planning</th>
<th>Strategic planning</th>
<th>Infrastructure planning</th>
<th>Regional and metropolitan planning</th>
</tr>
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</table>

PGM, which has been amended frequently, often after extensive arguments with the Generalitat’s Urbanism Commission.

This planning has been directed, almost exclusively, by architects, as one would expect in Spain. Its main concerns have been those of creating good urban form, respecting Barcelona’s historical growth (especially as expressed in Cerdà’s plan) and securing implementable projects within a tolerable timescale (normally within 10 years).

The aim of most of the projects has been to ‘finish’ the process of land-use change begun in the 1970s with the collapse or relocation of much of the industry within the city’s boundaries. Particular sites were used in the 1980s to create parks or social facilities, on publicly acquired land. The Olympic village began a phase of housing development, using private developers and therefore resulting in high market prices. Some of the most important projects of the 1990s can be seen in Figure 2; further details and maps can be found on the internet site rudi@herts.ac.uk. They fall broadly into three categories, as follows.

1. Along the coast from the Vila Olimpica, on ex-industrial land, now destined for a mixture of housing, offices and public open space, as well as a shopping centre at the sea end of the Diagonal. The housing will be mainly for high-income buyers, but with some part of the ‘Five Blocks’ scheme, under construction in 1998–1999, reserved for lower-income purchasers or renters.

2. Continuing the Diagonal, the main road crossing the city under Cerdà’s plan, so that it reaches the sea as originally planned. This new stretch of the Diagonal was completed in 1999. This allows housing and open spaces to be created in adjoining blocks, where construction began in 1999. Much of the housing here is also intended for low- and middle-income residents.

3. Redeveloping vacant industrial and railway land at La Sagrera, with housing and office development grouped around the proposed station for the high-speed train from Madrid and Paris, and with a strip of open space linking to the city centre.

The first of these areas includes the part of the city adjoining the small municipality of Sant Adrià del Besòs, and is the proposed location for the 2004 Universal Forum of Culture, a UNESCO-supported event proposed by the city.
council in 1996–1997. The project work for this area, which may include the relocated zoo and a marina as well as the open space and pavilions of the forum precinct, was still being developed at the time of writing, with a firm programme to be presented in late 2000.

These projects have been worked up under the guidance of the ‘forward planning’ section of the Urbanisme department of the council, formed by a small ‘Gabinet d’Estudis Urbanistics’. The then deputy head of this section reflected on the process in the Paris workshop (Ferrer, 1998). He identified three key characteristics of the ‘Barcelona model’—if one might be said to exist. One was the joint operation of plans, instruments and projects: a continuous dialectic, in space and time, up and down the scales, based on a long planning tradition, with genuine interdisciplinarity and integration of architecture, planning and infrastructures. Ferrer saw the achievement as based on the priority given to urban design, derived from the spatial understanding of concrete areas. This permitted the formulation of the ‘complex project’, incorporating all the features described above, and of which the seafront, the Diagonal or La Sagrera are examples in the 1990s.

The second characteristic identified by Ferrer is substantive: that planning in Barcelona has been highly urban, opting for dense, compact city building. This claim is fairly self-evidently true; only an opposite choice would surprise. But it relates to issues of the metropolitan–regional scale, which will be addressed later. Whether the planning has been ecologically urban is a much more contentious question that has emerged in recent debates.
The third characteristic was seen as the political quality of planning, with a tight collaboration of politicians with professionals and the citizenry in general. This collaboration though has been on the basis of considerable leadership from the elected politicians—particularly from Pasqual Maragall, the mayor from 1982 to 1997, rather than the perhaps more open and continuous collaborative form advocated by Healey (1997). Projects of the scale described above have been elaborated essentially by architects and certain councillors, incorporating known residents’ demands and district views, and then presented for public discussion once they are known to be broadly implementable—relatively open and collaborative, but expert-led.

Ferrer argues that this is the ‘real’ planning of the areas which are changing in the city, and his case is powerful. It would appear that the successes, and any failures, of the Barcelona model (accepting for a moment the view of the French seminar, where a consensus recognizing such a model seemed to emerge) rely on these foundations: an architect-led urban design approach, the complex project, drive and intelligent coordination by key politicians, ‘citizen complicity’, and compact urbanism. From a technical viewpoint it should be noted that the projects rested on extensive research studies carried out through the 1990s: of the city’s open spaces, of road systems, of housing supply and demand, of industrial land. In this way wider planning intersected with projects, not just in the sense of still following many of the broader strategies of the PGM, but also in tracking contemporary urban needs and trends. (The option of preparing a new city plan has been consistently rejected, though raised occasionally: partly a reflection of the perceived difficulties of such ‘blueprint planning’, technically and politically, partly a preference for the ‘complex project’—see Ferrer et al., 1997.)

**Strategic Planning**

If this then is the ‘planning that matters’, what of the rest of the planning/governance activities of the last decade? The answer lies partly in the scales, with infrastructure and metropolitan/regional planning more directed at the city region beyond the city boundary. But how far does this apply to strategic planning? This planning, whose earlier phases I have described elsewhere (Marshall, 1990, 1996), is more or less disregarded by the predominantly architect-formed Paris seminar. Where mentioned it is described as weak, a weakness based on “its lack of an urban, physical, localised conception, even of formalisation and design” (Ferrer, 1998). This is seen as applying equally to overall transport planning projects (the intermodal transport plan begun in 1987, with rather little to show beyond the new transport authority of 1998) and to economic development projects (such as the Barcelona ‘new projects’ campaign of the mid 1990s).

If so, this would be surprising. Barcelona’s politicians have devoted considerable energies to the strategic planning project since the late 1980s and claim it as a success: varying assessments include the 10 years’ ‘celebration’ of the Associació Pla Estatètic Barcelona 2000 (1998a), and the works of Borja & Castells (1997) and Santacana (1998). Strategic planning in the Barcelona sense has meant a kind of urban corporate planning, round a core of economic development goals, with certain social and environmental aims attached. Two complete cycles of planning have been undertaken, with the first and second plans completed in 1990
and 1994, each taking about two years to produce, with implementation phases in between. The process has been led by economists (councillors Raventós, Maragall and recently Rojo, and Francesc Santacana, the official in charge). The overall drive has been to place Barcelona as a city and city region in the front rank of European and global competitiveness. To do this one of the main tactics has been to identify key sectors, especially from the second plan onwards, including information technology, health, universities and tourism, partly organized under ‘quality networks’. If one is to identify the main impacts of the process, it is no doubt in this area of relatively ‘standard’ economic development strategy making and implementation that one should look.

However, the plans have dealt with a great range of other issues, particularly those of perceived large infrastructure deficits, as well as more social areas—housing and youth. Much is claimed in the evaluation of infrastructure work, and it would appear that the plan processes have helped to focus the city’s policies in this area, especially in the major projects for the port, the airport and the trade fair, forming an advocacy coalition for expansion in these areas. In the social field success appears to have been much less—and occasionally has been admitted to be so. Early objectives for social housing provision were not achieved. Environmental goals have, if anything, become less visible over the years, despite the rising salience of sustainability elsewhere in the council and in the wider society.

The accounts of the process cited above claim that the inclusive nature of the plan making is one of its key characteristics. Borja & Castells (1997) do make comments in passing on the need for wider participation of citizens in strategic planning, but broadly argue that the Barcelona model (here explicitly identified as one of strategic planning) is based on its open, collaborative nature. There is no doubt that many people (perhaps two or three thousand) have been involved in some capacity or another in discussing or following up or evaluating strategic plans since 1988. But to a large extent the process has been conducted within a specific elite alliance, of some city councillors with some economic and business experts. One public exhibition was held early on (in 1989–1990), but doubtless few ordinary citizens would know what the plans have been about. In the evaluation conducted by the secretary of the Foment (employers association) in 1998, only the two trade union bodies, and particularly that further to the left, Comissions Obreres, note the failure to deal with employment, social and environmental issues effectively enough. Comissions Obreres were clear that they had lost the arguments, on a range of issues, in this political–business coalition (Associació Pla Estratègic Barcelona 2000, 1988a, pp. 75–88).

One initiative, perhaps arising to an extent from this frustration, the industrial pact of 1995–1997, is interesting on several counts (Raventós, 1998; Rojo, 1998). The pact was particularly designed to address the concern that the city region was not retaining and promoting industrial businesses. It sought to bring in participants from across the metropolitan region, many of whom had also undertaken local municipal strategic plans. It linked to a degree to experiments with ‘territorial pacts’ elsewhere in the European Union (EU), also promoted by DG XVI (the Directorate General for Regional Affairs) within the European Commission with some Structural Funds support from 1997 onwards. Being an initiative with such a wide spatial reach and including so many interests, the proposals finally adopted remain relatively general. The formation of an Industrial Pact Association in 1997 left open the question of what the main drive
would be. But the process was similar to the wider strategic plan technique, in seeking to bring together key actors and build up what might be termed ‘institutional thickness’ (Amin & Thrift, 1994)—given the absence of institutions dealing with this kind of issue at the metropolitan level. An aspect giving some coherence to the process is its basis in work by economists in Barcelona universities, especially that by Joan Trullen at the Autonoma (see, for example, Trullen, 1998). This formulated a theory of both regional economies of scale, and sub-regional economy groupings (industrial districts to some degree), in the Barcelona region. On this basis Trullen argued the need for collective action to strengthen and promote the emerging structures, developing appropriate infrastructure, training and promotion policies across the region. It remains to be seen whether public administrations, or public–private partnerships, will be able to carry forward and detail this implied programme for regional competitiveness.

In 1998 the decision was taken to prepare a third plan. There were initially hopes that, like the industrial pact, this could move towards the metropolitan–regional scale, but there was little sign that this was occurring in early 1999. It is noticeable that the general objective of the third plan, agreed in September 1998, refers to Barcelona as “a metropolitan region, connected to the world, innovative and knowledge based, with an organisational capacity which will facilitate economic opportunities to its citizens” (Associació Pla Estratègic Barcelona 2000, 1998b, p. 1)—no environmental reference here, only the buzz-words of the late 1990s ‘Third Way’. At any rate, the renewed commitment in 1998–1999 showed the faith of politicians in the process, and their belief that it had become an essential part of the broader governance track of the city.

It is perhaps clear now why the link to the ‘real’ urban planning of the city has been relatively weak. Strategic planning has, increasingly, looked at wider scales than the city itself. Its concern with major economic sectors and infrastructure schemes have not affected greatly the zones being replanned in the city; the Olympics phase took care of much of the internal infrastructure provision (the Sagrera high-speed-train station is an exception). ‘Real’ planning has been especially concerned with matters where strategic planning has been weak—housing, local and wider environmental issues, public transport, energy and water, retail centres. Where perhaps there should have been more connection, the field of industry and office development, discussion seems to have been rather fragmented, with occasional debates on the need to retain industry within the city or regulate tertiary expansion, but with little coherent drive, beyond the 10 ‘Areas of New Centrality’ conceived in 1986. Thus when a decision has been made to include (or exclude) business premises in a ‘complex project’, the criteria appear to have been as much pragmatic/financial as related to broader priorities—hardly a rare experience in any planning context!—but not designed to reinforce links between specific projects and general policies. Thus strategic planning has not been brought to bear effectively on debates about the future of the Poblenou district around the extended Diagonal. This district has been a significant location for commercial activity, but the major planning projects referred to above are doubtless generating a property market dynamic which will expel these business areas. The council is aware of the issue, but the strategic planning process has not formed a wider framework for effective decision making.

With the continuation of the socialists in the city council in 1999, it seems likely that strategic planning will remain as part of the city’s governance
machinery, superseding its initial role as a ‘direction-finding’ and alliance-making technique of the socialists.

**Infrastructure Planning**

Barcelona’s urban planners have become increasingly aware in the 1990s of the central significance of the metropolitan and regional scale. This awareness has been reinforced by the rapid decline in the city’s population (apparently down 125,000 between 1991 and 1996; see Nello, 1998) as well as by the evident increasing economic and social integration of the region, permitted by new motorways and improved suburban train services and fuelled by changing lifestyle ambitions and business location decisions. In 1993 political leaders created Barcelona Regional (BR). This is a public enterprise, a semi-autonomous body directed by the leader of the Olympics implementation, Jose Antonio Acebillo (on BR’s work see Acebillo (1998) and Barcelona Regional S.A. (1996, 1999a, 1999b). The enterprise’s board is made up of members of the city council (the chair is the mayor), various metropolitan agencies and representatives of the Zona Franca (development agency), port, airport, RENFE (rail) and MERCABARNA (city wholesale markets). All these are shareholders.

BR was intended to provide expert input into issues arising in the metropolitan region, including the Llobregat Delta process of infrastructure provision, in which BR represents the city on the Management Committee (see Marshall, 1994a, b), work on the Besòs area, where BR is contracted by the Consortium formed in 1995 to work on the strategy for the area, and the preparation of the metropolitan regional plan (PTMB), where BR is contracted by the Diputació (provincial body) to comment on the draft plan. BR has become a significant actor in this field of metropolitan infrastructure planning, despite its limited resources. Broadly it has advocated infrastructure expansion, on the lines pushed by the strategic plans, but it has also commissioned work on ecological implications of changes in the region (see, for example, Folch & Paris, 1998).

The Llobregat Delta planning process showed how complex the field of infrastructure planning can be (Figure 3 shows a view of the proposals at the end of 1999). This has been confirmed by developments around the Llobregat since then (for example in the airport, where a third runway is to be built—not envisaged in the 1993 agreement), and in the Besòs basin on the other side of the city, where the same range of public agencies must cooperate to achieve any progress in such large-scale socioecological projects. Given the deadline set by the 2004 project, progress in the Besòs basin has become a matter of urgency, with works needed to power lines, to the river bed and borders, to the sewage treatment plant at the river mouth, to the existing power stations, not to mention the issue of the large, problematic housing estates, La Mina and La Catalana, adjoining the area.

BR now has two roles, one essentially project management, where it works like a planning and engineering consultancy, the other the preparation of studies and strategies, both for large networks and for specific areas of major intervention. In both roles its work has carried it increasingly into areas overlapping with the city council’s mainline departments, as on the work on La Sagrera and on Poblenou. So far the prestige of its director appears to be giving it considerable influence on all areas of infrastructure planning. It is rather more linked to the strategic planning processes than to more social or ecological dimensions of
planning. This is where political differences might emerge about preferred models for the city and region’s future. The problem with this infrastructure planning style is that it tends to depoliticize such debates, making them a matter for technicians or experts, beyond the realm of public debate. However, as with the Olympics, the pressure of the 2004 deadline creates an impetus towards this kind of planning style.

Metropolitan-Regional Planning

Infrastructure planning clearly overlaps greatly with the final ‘planning type’ examined here, that for the metropolitan region. The general plan for Catalonia (PTG), approved by the Generalitat in 1995 (see Marshall, 1995), did not specify much detail about the Barcelona region, preferring to leave this to the plan for the region (PTMB). But this regional plan did not appear, even in draft form, until July 1998. This slowness reflected in part the balance dictated by the 1987 law in the bodies controlling the process. These were the political commission, composed of 11 from the Generalitat and 11 from the local authorities, with careful balancing again within each ‘side’ of these teams, and the technical commission, dissolved after July 1998 pending political decisions on the next ‘Formulation’ stage required by the 1987 law. This careful balancing has allowed differences between representatives of the Generalitat and municipalities of the region to emerge continually, and has slowed progress.
The model adopted in the 1998 draft is regarded as broadly ‘developmental-ist’, basing urbanization on a regional transport grid composed of much new road building and some rail development. The plan aims to accommodate half a million new dwellings by 2025, based on the figure of 4.7 million population stipulated by the PTG. Some regard this figure as too high, but so far there has been no real public debate on the issue. The plan proposes protection of the ‘islands’ of natural areas and agriculture within the grid, where development is not proposed. Overall the plan draws strongly on the philosophy of its director, Albert Serratos, the veteran engineer urbanist now in his 70s. It also benefits from very high quality analysis carried out both within the plan team itself and from work elsewhere, an important example of the latter being published in Mancomunitat de Municips (1995), where the metropolitan region’s housing, economy and transport dynamics are carefully and graphically dissected. (Details of the plan are to be available on a CD ROM, in Catalan.)

It is evident that the proposals of this plan are vital to the future direction of change in the city—especially if the plan becomes the vehicle for progressing and implementing key infrastructure schemes, which it has not been up to now. Whilst change in the region in the past has been driven by a range of partly unrelated factors—public rail and road investment, housing and industrial market dynamics—there may be a chance with this plan to provide some regulation of this process from perhaps 2005 or 2010 onwards.

The ‘no change’ results of the 1999 elections in city and Generalitat are likely to give the green light for the completion in some form of the plan, particularly as a reshuffle of Generalitat planning functions in January 2000 put J.A. Solans in charge of the plan. An alternative and not impossible outcome would be that it is quietly put away in a cupboard—a most unfortunate waste of years of work but possibly an appropriate tribute to the deep differences on key directions for the future of the region.

**Borrowing and Innovation**

A mixture of borrowing from ideas and practice current elsewhere and local innovation has characterized these planning forms. Most original perhaps has been the development of the ‘complex project’ and its related implications since the early 1980s, although similar phenomena have been common in other European cities in the same period, from different traditions and perspectives (Birmingham’s treatment of the Broad Street area comes to mind, with a clear British planning and economic development drive). The elaboration of the US-imported strategic/corporate planning tradition (Bryson, 1988) has also been notable, along with the onwards diffusion of the model throughout Spain and Latin America (Borja & Castells, 1997; de Forn, 1998). The industrial pact approach of 1995–1997 has also shown innovation, drawing on work by Barcelona economists —tying in to a significant degree to parallel thinking in Italy since the 1980s. The ‘concertacion’ process needed to put together and progress the Llobregat delta agreement was a ‘necessary’ innovation for a semi-federal state where planning and funding powers are shared; no doubt federal states have ‘invented’ similar processes several times over. The formation of BR revealed the creativeness of Barcelona’s leaders in trying to respond to the increasingly acute regional dynamic, given their institutionally weak position at this level.
Thus a perhaps familiar picture emerges, for the urban planning field, where ideas and approaches are borrowed liberally across the developed world (Ward, in press), but where these are often adapted and then carried on again elsewhere. In strategic planning Barcelona has acted as a staging post for Hispanic and Latin American diffusion. The area of greatest innovation remains that within one of Barcelona’s (and Spain’s) leading edges, the architectural profession, building on a deep tradition of action in the city. In the other areas there is much more of the common Spanish pattern of borrowing the popular US/north European ideas—though often with Barcelona as ‘pioneer borrower’. If there is then a Barcelona model, it would be a particular combination of borrowings and innovation, new to a degree only.

Achievements

The results of all this planning are still, to a large extent, invisible, if we concentrate on the planning of the 1990s (an initial evaluation of earlier work is given in Marshall (1996)). It is clear that the ‘complex project’ approach is continuing to give some results. The housing project in the ‘Five Blocks’ scheme on the seafront is being implemented, for example, and the opening up of the new Diagonal district is advancing. Here we see adequate instruments for the projects—private housing developers prepared to develop, publicly owned land whose below-market-value disposal to these developers allows social housing deals to be done, the city prepared to compulsorily purchase land and build roads. In other cases, the prospects are not necessarily so good. The Diagonal Mar scheme collapsed in the early 1990s when the US developer withdrew; it is now in the hands of another US company and construction of a luxury high-rise housing scheme, within an area of public parkland, began in 1999. Private corporation decisions have also affected parts of the Sagrera scheme, as well as RENFE (state rail) finances. Planning in Barcelona, as elsewhere, has become dependent on private funding for most implementation. If planners try to build social and environmental goals into the projects, developers may be discouraged, and implementation may stall—in contrast to the primarily public funded schemes of the 1980s. The trade-off is then an unpleasant one for any ‘progressive’ city council. Either delay may be tolerated, with possible electoral damage for the appearance of inaction, or a less good option may be accepted, which does not achieve the council’s goals for an improved quality of life in the district.

Strategic planning has not, to a large extent, addressed these dilemmas of the ‘real’ planners of the city, and therefore tends to be disregarded by those ‘at the sharp end’ of project making. In the same way regional–territorial planning in the Barcelona region and Catalonia can be disregarded because it does not carry effective implementation instruments with it.

The 2004 project has sharpened the above dilemma for Barcelona’s politicians and planners—such that one wonders whether such a clear deadline in such a difficult part of the city was really a sensible one for the city to set itself. Where the scheme depends on public money, as much of it does, or perhaps on that of utility companies (again, very important), then perhaps the money will be found, given that the central government and the Generalitat are apparently committed to the project. But significant private actors are involved: the owners of Diagonal Mar and other sites in the area, and the poor owners of the many recently purchased flats on La Mina housing estate, who are likely to resist any
drastic measures to ‘improve’ their area, in the short term. These owners/actors will no doubt operate at their own speed, which may not deliver an attractive environment for the millions of visitors expected from 1 May 2004. In both planning and urban competitiveness terms, it is a high-risk strategy, probably depending much on the trust placed in BR and Jose Antonio Acebillo.

Urban Governance

If we look more broadly at governance processes in the city, it is clear that the same thinking which has promoted strategic planning has brought forth an increasing number of related collaborative exercises. An exhibition organized by the council at the end of 1998 revealed the ‘associative’ drive behind its social policies (‘Barcelona en Persona’; El Mundo supplement December 1998 has articles on the city council’s social dimension). The council celebrated the wide range of voluntary associations in the city, as well as the tenth anniversary of the Municipal Welfare Council—the first of such consultative bodies (there are now 16). These bodies bring together the council and the voluntary sector, or ‘civil society’ more broadly, including businesses.

Joan Clos, succeeding Maragall as mayor in 1997, has put increased emphasis on these consultation modes, even holding an exercise in 1998 whereby all citizens were encouraged to say what kind of city and council they wanted, via telephone, e-mail and so on. Whether populist electoralism or pure municipal openness, this suggests a certain void in the council’s—especially the socialists’—programme, and may be related to the declining membership (from a low base) of Spanish political parties. Another Clos initiative has been the formation of the Council of the City, which will bring together the other sectoral consultative councils, the councils of the districts and representatives of other associations (Clos, 1998). Clearly the dialogue–pact–collaboration model of governance is being taken further—towards, one might think, naïvely, the dissolution of the city council’s own electoral legitimacy. The other ideas in ‘good currency’ in the US or UK’s Third Way—focus groups, citizen juries, public opinion surveys—were also being explored by the council’s academic advisors in 1998 (Vallès, 1998). The return of the socialists in the 1999 elections, with an increased majority, may show that Clos was in tune with the electorate—or it may just show the public’s scepticism about the main opposition parties, tainted by government at regional and central level.

So where is Barcelona’s governance going, and what part are the various planning forms playing in the evolution of the city’s ‘regime’? Here there is not room to provide much of the material on which to found an adequate answer, but a few schematic points may help.

First, the transition to a more private-sector-led style of governance has been progressing since the late 1980s. This has been partly expressed through strategic planning, and has also affected the reality of the urban development schemes of the 1990s. The general rightward shift in politics has affected the city, despite the oddity of socialists/ex-communists retaining control of the council. The decline of the significance of residents’ associations and of trade unions in the city’s governance has matched this shift to more elite and business positions. The council promotes itself as a leader in reforming its own governing arrangements (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 1999), and it is clear that the current mayor is a believer in the new public-sector management styles, and the promotion of
professional technicians to the key executive positions, as shown in the announcement of his new team in September 1999.

Second, the shift has, however, been quite variable. The move to governance modes (effectively public–private partnerships or networks where private powers predominate) has been greatest, perhaps predictably so, in the area of economic development—and hence most visible in the city’s strategic planning.

Third, and more generally, it is far too soon in Barcelona and Catalonia to see a wholesale shift to ‘governance’, from government(s)-led public action. This is not to play down the massive impact of neoliberalism, competitiveness ideologies, and so on, in the city and region. But all levels of government would appear to retain considerable public legitimacy. Although the central government’s programme for the future may well move far more rapidly to total dismantling of public provision in far more areas, this has not yet happened; and therefore perhaps the broader structural conditions for local and regional governance modes (as seen perhaps in the US for over 20 years, and as seen or imagined in parts of the UK) are not in place.

Overall, then, one may argue that a shift to a new ‘urban regime’ (as for example portrayed in Lauria, 1997) has occurred since the late 1980s, but that this remains partial, uncompleted and perhaps unstable. Practice in the field of urban and regional planning is implicated in this partial shift, but to a quite variable extent. Certainly changes in governance and planning forms have been related, but by no means in a tightly linked one-to-one fashion. Some local urban development planning has been able to retain commitment to ideals of public space provision and public transport, supported by continuing public spending and ownership in these areas. Privatization in these areas is not as advanced as it is, for example, in the UK. In addition, the council has been able to maintain many social and health services (a quarter of its revenue goes on this sphere), including running the city’s public hospitals. It has also promoted many small-scale local initiatives, for example with the new (mainly Moroccan) immigrant groups in the city. A continuing openness to associative activity has helped this work; in this sphere the tendency to elite governance is much less strong.

Coherence or Fragmentation?

I have contrasted here the degree of success of the urban planners within the city with the uneven achievements of the other three planning types. However, I have also suggested that the ‘Barcelona model’ of urban planning may be hitting problems, in the private-finance-driven context of the present. The failure to connect urban planning with certain aspects of strategic planning/economic development planning has also been noted, along with the virtual institutional impossibility of the city addressing the metropolitan–regional scale.

This issue was addressed, in a sense, by Borja & Castells (1997), particularly in their Chapter 7 “Strategic Plans and Metropolitan Projects”. Jordi Borja, a sociologist and chronicler of the Barcelona social movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Borja 1977), was a city councillor and deputy mayor, responsible for some of the key projects in the 1980s, especially the decentralization scheme whereby 10 districts were created as the primary service providers in the city. In Chapter 7 (one assumes mainly his work) he presents his recipe for “territorial strategic planning”, which one may take as, to a degree, a presentation of the overall Barcelona model. He argues that old-style territorial master plans suffered
problems; this is a common refrain in Spain, perhaps the result of the experience of ‘master planning’ having been primarily under a dictatorship—master plans are clearly associated with absence of participation. British territorial plans such as local or structure plans cannot be criticized in this sense, or at least to the same degree, any more than many plans in other European countries.

Borja then argues that strategic planning of the kind he advocates can replace master plans and operate in a dialectic with large-scale urban projects, generating rapid results (within 2–5 years). Given the necessity to work at a metropolitan scale, he argues that “the new city—an urban–regional space— is fashioned through large scale [metropolitan] projects” (Borja & Castells, 1997, p. 158). Thus the ‘city project’, created through a concerted strategic planning process, becomes the umbrella for the multitude of projects at lower scales. The project for the city “translates mainly into a set of large-scale projects that are at first sight sectorial or specialised but which are or seek to be versatile, transforming and articulated in a coherent whole i.e. strategic” (p. 172).

There is no doubt that Barcelona has benefited to some extent from a process of this kind. The fragmentation has not been extreme, much reduced by coherent political leadership. But Borja’s model may also be taken as a critique of his city’s experience in recent years. Perhaps he has observed a certain fissure between the strategic level and particular projects, and certainly an inability to deal with the metropolitan-region scale, which he and Castells regard as key.

Borja’s ideal model bears a resemblance to some aspects of Healey et al.’s (1997) account of strategic spatial planning in some European cities. The ideas of developing institutional capital, of strategic plan making as social and political mobilization, of creating spatial organizing ideas (which then frame projects), of using collaborative processes to develop new policy agendas and discourses—all of these rephrase or could enrich Borja’s vision for an improved city planning process. One aspect of his recommendations is perhaps particularly Barcelona based (or southern European): the insistence on the importance of urban design, that schemes “must first be visualised” (Borja & Castells, 1997, p. 170). However, in general a certain convergence of prescription is evident here.

Whether this prescription is realistic or likely to deliver the ‘good city’ of the early 21st century is quite another matter. The obvious and frequently voiced criticism of models such as those of Borja and Healey is the way they deal with (or not) the profound differences of interest—real conflicts—in contemporary city regions. It is probable that the model can only be consensual or collaborative, in current reality, because certain power elites are in effect deciding. I am certain that neither Borja nor Healey would wish to rely on an elite process, but the absence of an effective and explicit treatment of power processes in their discussions can push models of collaborative or strategic planning in this direction. The danger then is that the weakly theorized ‘Barcelona model’ is ‘sold’ elsewhere to equally under-theorized or invisible power contexts.

What emerges is not so much one ‘Barcelona model’, as a handful of models, some genuinely making policy and implementing, some trying to establish themselves, but with limited coherence between the several types. Healey, with other European planning academics, examined ‘strategic spatial planning’ practice in a range of cities, identifying certain common features, as well as differences (Healey et al., 1997). The same could not have been attempted for Barcelona, or not in the same way, because there the different strands which could constitute ‘strategic spatial planning’ are, to a significant degree, going
their separate ways. Economists consider that prospective governance needs to bring together a wide range of public and private actors—and institute strategic plans. But these do not connect so well, in many cases, to planning on the ground, dominated by architects. The link to infrastructure planning is better, given the importance strategic plans give to that, but the complexity of policy making and implementation in the Barcelona region is enough to disrupt any moderately rational planning process. More seriously, and increasingly so, the scale relation to the metropolis and region is weak, and dogged by political and institutional problems. To some extent this issue is skirted by means of complex institutional innovation, for example by giving a strong technical expert like J.A. Acebillo a considerable influence across planning’s spatial ranges. But such personalization of planning could have its limitations, up against other strong personalities in other agencies or administrations, such as J.A. Solans or A. Serratosa.

The result of this (partial) fragmentation is that public control of change is limited—perhaps increasingly so. In other words, democratic control of changes in urban development, infrastructure and environment is weak, given the very loose or indirect public involvement in (at least) strategic, infrastructure and metropolitan–region planning. As many key issues of daily life now are located precisely in these areas, not in the conventional field of municipal facilities and localized planning, this is problematic. It is perhaps especially so in the planning context of Spain, where planning was probably the carrier of local democracy for the first 10 or 15 years after the end of Francoism.

But is this so serious, under current circumstances in Barcelona? The quality of much planning will no doubt remain high, given the strength of work at a range of scales—including that of the region (whether this strength has been fully used there is less clear). No doubt no European city region has a coherent, integrated planning process, with its own nicely functioning planning model, bringing together the four types of planning discussed here. Current wider political and economic tendencies, represented in part by neoliberalism, positively mitigate against democratic control and integration of urban–regional change. A (reasonably) democratic city-region model of planning is perhaps hard to imagine under these circumstances.

In any case, in this real context outlined here, where elite politics dominates much of the city region’s fortunes, the fragmentation of Barcelona’s planning may take on a more positive light. Perhaps because of this absence of an overall coherent project, despite the aspirations of Maragall, Borja and others, the ‘real’ implementation of urban change was able for many years to continue the dynamic of the immediate post-Francoist years, carrying popular wishes into some aspects of local urban development. Steering clear of the embrace of the more elite-led strategic or infrastructure planning (let alone the grandiose plans for the city region, little touched by popular concerns) may then be seen as a positive bonus for local planning. But will this work in the future, when regional and infrastructure issues overshadow the local development projects so competently planned up to the early 1990s? And, at the regional level, has it really worked in the past, given the massive spread of inadequately coordinated land and infrastructure development in much of the metropolitan region, as documented in the PTMB’s work?

We see here, therefore, a certain playing out of the most basic debates of planning: how the processes of rational planning or projecting may relate to the
continuing play of social and political power. Is an overall coherence in planning likely to be better, along the lines sought by Healey et al. or Borja, or is a dislocated process actually likely to protect certain weaker social interests better? For myself, the issue of coherence is not purely or perhaps even primarily an issue of abstract institutional design, but depends on the link to some form of powerful progressive politics. The problem for Barcelona, and other European cities, is the absence of such politics at the end of the 1990s. I would like to think that Barcelona could bring its clearly established technical and political skills to move further towards a sophisticated democratic city-regional model. Against the anti-politics as common in Spain as in the UK, I would also assert that the results of elections in 1999 and 2000 and the ideologies of the winners have been and will be one important factor in the possibility of progressing such planning, as will the absence or emergence of combative social movements.

If we look at the comparative implications of the Barcelona experience, the main message is caution. In this last section I have explored the interweaving of power relations within institutions, planning instruments and broader politics and society. It is the whole dynamic of these interrelations which carries the reality of planning projects, not particular aspects of planning style or method alone. The overall governance changes in Barcelona have been moving in a broadly elitist direction in the 1990s and this has affected planning. But power relations are certainly different in London or Birmingham or Lyon or Milan, and any transfer of either planning or governance forms is thus inherently problematic, without understanding of the whole political, social and technical geometry (this is one way of interpreting aspects of the recent work of Jessop, as for example presented by MacLeod & Goodwin (1999)). This is not to say that elements of Barcelona’s ‘complex project’ or ‘strategic planning’ approaches are not worthy of very serious study and perhaps borrowing. However, a more careful comparative study of European planning and governance formulas and dynamics would help in understanding the implications of any such borrowing in very varied contexts.

Notes

1. See for example the reference by Tony Travis to Barcelona “which in recent years has often been cited as a symbol of good government” (Guardian, 27 January 1999, supplement p. 8). The sanctification of the city continued apace through 1999. I would like to thank friends and colleagues in Barcelona for their help in providing information and stimulating discussion on recent developments. None should feel responsible for my (mis)interpretations presented in this paper. They include Josep Maria Carrera and Amador Ferrer at Barcelona City Council, Francesc Carbonell in the team preparing the metropolitan regional plan and Joaquim Clusa at Barcelona Regional.

2. Since writing this paper, I am encouraged that these comments, which may appear to some over-critical, are not contradicted by those of some of the far more knowledgeable practitioner-academics cited in Ferrer & Sabaté (1999), particularly the observations of Manuel de Solà-Morales and Joan Busquets. If I am only stating what is common knowledge to Catalan cognoscenti, that is fine, as my aim is to make a contribution to wider European discussions about contemporary planning practice.

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