Superilles: Politics Change, a Vision Endures

Barcelona, Spain
CASE STUDIES IN NEIGHBORHOOD PLANNING
FOR YOUNG CHILDREN AND THEIR CAREGIVERS

Cities included in this series

Antwerp
Barcelona
London
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[...]
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Our work is to rapidly convert cities into places whose systems nurture human life. An important facet of this work is to share information and analyses of such experiments with a broad audience, from practitioners, advocates, and zealots, to newcomers who are curious or concerned about the future.

Each case study in this series is analyzed through the lens of how it benefits the health of young children and their caregivers, and details how it was carried out. These cases are one part of “Born Thriving,” a suite of publications created to mainstream infant, toddler, and caregiver-focused neighborhood planning in Tirana, Albania.

Born Thriving is carried out in collaboration with the Municipality of Tirana, with the support of Bernard van Leer Foundation’s Urban95 program. This research benefited from the work of TUT-POL (Transforming Urban Transport Political Strategies and Tactics) at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, led by professors Diane E. Davis and Lily Song.

We are also indebted to review from our Bernard van Leer Foundation colleagues, especially Julien Vincelot, Andrea Sansotta-Torres, and Ankita Chachra. As well as Taylor Reich and Iwona Alfred at Institute for Transportation and Development Policy. The cases in this series use comparative city data from ITDPs Pedestrian’s First Tool—specifically, data on weighted population density, people’s proximity to services, and average block size. For more information on the tool’s methodology visit: https://pedestriansfirst.itdp.org/.

Finally, we extend our gratitude to the many people we interviewed for these cases, and their generosity to candidly discuss the challenges in their work from which we can all gain so much.
This is a story of how Barcelona’s urban mobility infrastructure is being transformed through a novel use of the city’s hallmark grid plan. Originally proposed as a strategy to reclaim the streets from cars in the face of growing congestion and pollution, the superilles (superblock) project has at times become the object of a tug of war between political parties wanting to claim ownership of it. Barcelona en Comú, the city’s current municipal party, has sometimes struggled to implement expansions of the project in the face of political resistance, but ground-up participatory planning has proven effective in fighting misconceptions, and completed blocks have won approval from many resident communities. The superilles project gives us a look into what happens when a large-scale urban intervention becomes over-politicized, and how planners and designers can respond in ways that prioritize the well-being of resident communities across decades of changing political mandates.
What makes this project supportive of infants, toddlers, and their caregivers?

→ Environmental health: This project radically reduces motor traffic as part of a wider effort to reduce congestion and air pollution, which disproportionately affects the health of infants, toddlers, and their caregivers (ITCs).

→ Traffic calming: The inner roads of superilles are designed to prioritize cyclists and pedestrians by drastically reducing speeds and volume of motor traffic, leading to a much safer public realm for ITCs.

→ Clustered services: Superilles are often implemented in dense, mixed-use neighborhoods, where schools, community centers, and childcare centers are already clustered.

→ Play: Play is a key element of the superilles project, and playscapes are featured in every intervention.

→ Rest: Superilles are designed to be comfortable places to spend time in by having plenty of street furniture, shade, and urban green.

BACKGROUND

In the 1990s, air pollution in Barcelona was causing thousands of premature deaths, high rates of noise were affecting residents’ quality of life, and the city’s inadequate road-safety regulations were leading to hundreds of accidents, some of them fatal. Recognizing that all of these issues were byproducts of private motor-vehicle use, the city launched the superilla project to reclaim as much as 70 percent of the streets for mixed uses, prioritizing pedestrians and cyclists. The plan emphasizes maximum participation, widespread distribution, and tactical urban planning, which allows for more tweaking and adaptation to residents’ needs. It works to fulfill three technical criteria: habitability, greenery and biodiversity, and mobility and transport.

The Barcelona superilles concept was designed by Salvador Rueda, an urban planner and ecologist who worked for the city government for years before starting his own public research institution, the Urban Ecology Agency of Barcelona (BCNecologica). A Barcelona superilla is a 400 x 400 meter grid of nine blocks, in which the interior streets are closed and private vehicular traffic is diverted to the perimeter. Motor traffic in the interior of the block is limited to residential traffic, services, and emergency vehicles, along with other unloading vehicles in special circumstances. By opening up space for gathering, street play, and active transport, the project sets out to improve the comfort of public space, adapt to more sustainable mobility, increase and improve urban greenery and diversity, and promote citizen participation and co-responsibility. As a key component of several municipal plans—including Barcelona’s 2013–2018 Urban Mobility Plan, Public Commitment to Sustainability 2012–2022, and Biodiversity Plan—the superilles project’s capacity to define the city’s future trajectory has made it the object of ongoing political struggle.

The concept of the superilla was first proposed in Barcelona in 1987 in response to noise pollution issues in the Gràcia neighborhood. It wasn’t until 1993, however, that the first superilla was implemented in the neighborhood El Born, a formerly run-down part of the Old Town that is now gentrified and home to many tourism businesses and boutiques. Two blocks followed in 2003, both in the Gràcia neighborhood. The projects in Gràcia were well received by residents, and studies showed that active transport had increased dramatically.
while car ridership dropped. But Gràcia also gentrified.⁶

Long after these three projects, the superilla plan was passed in March 2015 under the center-right government of Xavier Trias, as part of the city’s urban-mobility plan. The party embraced the full scope of the project at five hundred blocks and pursued participatory process for incrementally selecting pilot sites. Trias’s support was market oriented: the superilles were a reliable way to increase property values and make the city more attractive to tourism. But his control of the project was cut short later that year when the city’s political leadership took a drastic turn with the election of Mayor Ada Colau of Barcelona en Comú, a party that traces its beginnings to grassroots housing activism.

As the political leadership in the city has changed hands, the project has developed a complicated and unstable reputation. Once Colau inherited the project, it became much more focused on public space, and consequently more well known throughout the city.⁷ Kai Klause, of the Barcelona Laboratory for Urban Environmental Justice and Sustainability (BCNEUJ), notes that the potential scope and international acclaim of the superilla project has made it the object of political strife between municipal parties that want to claim it as their own, ultimately leading to implementation shortcomings and increased political resistance.⁸ Efforts to finish the project within four-year legislative periods have undermined participatory methods and rushed implementation.

Meanwhile, the project has become a symbol of deeper ideological divides, as it has come to represent Colau’s party and its mission, leading opposition parties and some residents to reject it outright on ideological grounds.⁹ This isn’t so surprising: unlike most design interventions, the superilla project challenges our most foundational ideas about what and who streets are for, and how public space should be used. At stake in the battle over “owning” the superilla project is the ability to interpret and define the trajectory of Barcelona’s city model. As of 2019, only five superilles had been implemented, but 495 more are in the works.

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notice was given of the street transformation, with just some flyers distributed a month in advance. Residents were mostly surprised to wake up to find the traffic around their neighborhood transformed.

**PROCESS**

Students employed a tactical urbanism approach to set up internal streets in Poblenou: tires, paint, and some cheap planters delineated the space. Initially, the intervention was interpreted by some as a symbol of Colau’s imposing power, and residents formed an association to resist the superilla. But, as behavior adapted and residents began to enjoy the new amenities, the project garnered more approval.10

A few months after the intervention was implemented, the city began a proper consultation process with the neighborhood residents to determine what should be removed and what should be considered for more permanent capital investment. Today, the Poblenou superilla still looks a bit haphazard, but it is a generally appreciated public space with play areas and picnic tables for residents to gather around. It has also served as a lesson for ongoing superilla projects. The accelerated implementation of the Poblenou project is for the most part regarded positively by Rueda and municipal representatives like Janet Sanz, who believe that people will embrace well-designed public space when they’re confronted with it, and that asking them to support something they cannot see stalls the process unnecessarily.11

After Poblenou, the implementation process has shifted into a more predictable model. Each superilla is designed through a phased participatory process that can be divided into first developing the project vision (gathering information and producing a proposal) and then beginning implementation (seeing through the action plan).12 This structure is relatively consistent across all neighborhoods, though it is adapted based on a neighborhood’s density, economic activity, and resident population. The superilla process begins with consultations and workshops involving an inclusive variety of stakeholders, including experts, residents, and children.

The goal of these workshops is to gather local information about the neighborhood, which is critical for drafting the proposal. A team of experts will then perform a technical
examination of the neighborhood based on sustainability indicators and public space characteristics, and combine these findings with the contextual information to generate a proposal. This proposal is then presented at a second workshop, where residents have a chance to give feedback and help define the final form of the proposal for the superilla. When this proposal enters the implementation stage, it is pursued primarily through tactical-urbanism methods that invite ongoing changes according to the needs of the community. In some cases, more capital-intensive interventions are then pursued. In the final year of the superilla implementation, an evaluation process is created in order to measure the impact of the superilla according to relevant indicators, such as transport modes and greenery. The participatory process is also monitored throughout, and for transparency documented on a website devoted to the superilla.  

### IMPLICATIONS FOR TIRANA

The Barcelona superilla project is an illuminating case study for understanding the fundamentally political nature of public-space interventions. As in Barcelona, public-space and active-transport interventions in Tirana are deeply politicized, and often resisted outright for ideological reasons rather than design or planning objections. The more radical an intervention is, and the more drastically it upends current notions of what a city and street is for, the more political resistance it can expect to receive. Pursuing more radical interventions will thus require confronting ideological conflicts. As Christos Zografos, a Barcelona-based researcher that studied the superilla project, says in an interview with Qendra Marrëdhënie, “A basic challenge is how to deal with local rejection. When you implement these things you need to pay attention to the micro-politics of what is happening: what are the relationships that exist between the neighborhoods? What about at the level of decision-making? How do everyday politics influence your ability to implement this smoothly?”  

Similar to Barcelona, many of the conflicts over large scale public-space interventions in Tirana come down to party loyalties.
cases, people may feel protective of their ability to drive with ease through the city because they see cars as symbols of status, wealth, and consumer freedom. Transportation by private vehicle is regarded as important to the economy, such that a pedestrianization proposal can appear to threaten business. While there aren't any easy solutions to these culturally-specific and ingrained ideologies around public space and the city, it is important to be aware of how they are mediating public response and participation. To this end, developing a media strategy and training local journalists to write about planning politics can go a long way in fostering a more nuanced and informed public understanding of proposed interventions.

It is also important to confront these cultural and political dimensions in the planning strategy itself. As Zografos notes, design interventions must take shape through a participatory process. It’s not a matter of checking a box, but of asking the difficult question about how much authority can be relinquished: “Are you designing the project with a clear view of your vision and you just want to get input as to how to improve that pathway, or are you designing it in such a way that you’re open to not implementing the project at all, or are you designing it as a process where local organizations can jump in to lead it?” According to Zografos, the answers to these questions have important implications for the nature of the final intervention.

In the Poblenou case, the city adapted the project by conceding an internal road to vehicle traffic at the request of residents, and entered a thorough consultation process with them in the months following the initial presentation. If it hadn’t been for this engagement, it is likely that the resident association working to remove the project would have succeeded. Instead, many of these residents turned out to favor it. Rather than ignore public resistance, the Barcelona case suggests that opening projects up to dialogue, especially while they are still malleable and low investment, can ultimately foster a more sympathetic response from the public. For example, these dialogues in Tirana could benefit from addressing the economic benefits of having more walkable streets. In fact, local businesses do better with more foot traffic, cities get a greater return on investment when funding pedestrian and cycling infrastructure, and households in walkable areas have much lower transportation costs. However, making the economic case should not lead us to lose sight of the larger picture, which is ultimately about public health, climate adaptation, and mobility justice.
NOTES


2 Commission for Ecology, Urban Planning and Mobility, Let’s Fill Streets with Life: Establishing Superblocks in Barcelona (Barcelona: Ajuntament de Barcelona, May 2016), 27.


5 Roberts, “Barcelona Wants to Build.”

6 Roberts.

7 Roberts.

8 Klause, “Barcelona Superblocks.”

9 Klause.

10 Roberts, “Barcelona Wants to Build.”

11 Roberts.


13 Commission for Ecology.


15 Zografos.

Qendra Marrëdhënie (Relationship Center) collaborates with local institutions to build just spaces for children and those who care for them.

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These case studies are part of “Born Thriving,” a multi-year program to mainstream neighborhood planning principles focused on the needs of young children and their caregivers in Tirana, Albania.

Born Thriving’s written guidance consists of three volumes: neighborhood design guidelines (vol. 1); the neighborhood indicator baseline (vol. 2), and neighborhood planning case studies (vol. 3).

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Qendra Marrëdhënie, 2020

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