Chapter VIII

22@bcn Plan: 
Bringing Barcelona Forward in the Information Era

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ABSTRACT

Barcelona has been internationally recognized for its exemplary urban regeneration policy since the Olympic Games of 1992. By that time, the so-called Barcelona model was not only about urban planning and new economic strategies, but about urban culture and social participation as well. After a period of stagnation, the new orientation of the municipal policy points to a more entrepreneurial logic. The growing role of private initiatives and the inclusion of information and communication technology in local policies are questions that affect the definition and shape of the new city, as well as the theory and practice of its governance. The “22@bcn Plan” is one of the highlights of Barcelona’s change into a city of knowledge. This chapter asks whether and how this specific plan challenges the well-known Barcelona model.

INTRODUCTION

Between 1986 and 1992, Barcelona experienced one of its greatest periods of urban transformation. The urban policy implemented during that time was a successful combination of urban planning initiatives and the spread of a discourse based on local and global promotion of a new urban image for the city. Led by the public administration and with almost unconditional popular support, this process became internationally known as the Barcelona model of urban transformation. After
some years of apparent deprivation, a second wave of urban policy came to the city. It was, again, a combination of urban physical changes and an appropriate discourse based on the general principles of what has become known as the city of knowledge.

At the end of the 1990s, Barcelona opened its doors to the new global model of knowledge-based urban development. This time, the challenge consisted of promoting new economy and cultural industries (Gdaniec, 2001; Selfa, 2005). The city’s new economic activities (categorized as activities) included cultural and ICT industries, digital services, and knowledge centers (Clos, 2004; Partal, 2001) (see Table 1).

Barcelona, like other former industrial cities in Europe, started to adapt its urban structure to the changing productive requirements of late capitalism (Olivella, 2000; Clua, 2005). The spatial emplacement for such urban transformation was the city’s former industrial neighborhood (once called the Catalan Manchester): Poblenou.

Poblenou’s regeneration strategy was called 22@bcn Plan. The development of the Plan has involved the strengthening of economic actors (mainly private agents) with a growing role in the city’s redefinition. Today, the city is noticeably reoriented toward a major emphasis on the innovative spirit of urban entrepreneurial leadership, rather than on the inclusion of public participation in the regeneration process. In fact, the entrepreneurial turn clearly is questioning public-oriented urban policy, as representatives of the private sector already have discussed with local authorities the possible end of the Barcelona model (Capel, 2006).

In relation to entrepreneurial logic taking over the City Council’s function as a state agent, Boixader (2004) has stated:

“We have been talking about the public initiative in the promotion of [Barcelona’s] transformation. But this initiative is moving on a much reduced field of alternatives, which could be interpreted as proof of the public power’s alignment with market forces. (...) If land re-qualification has had such an important dimension it is because industry and the working class population reduce the value of real state operations” [Authors’ translation].

The content of this chapter is structured in four parts. The next section includes the background concepts that are central to the analysis of Barcelona’s new urban model. Following this section, the Barcelona model will be briefly presented. The definition of this urban model is highly relevant, in that it allows a better understanding of the further evolution of public-private partnerships in Barcelona. Then, the 22@bcn Plan will be introduced, by first locating the Poblenou district in its historical context. Attention will be focused on the gap between the economic success that the plan aims for, and the social responses that the plan has received. The chapter concludes with final remarks and some reflections on future trends.

This chapter has three main objectives. The first one is to shed light on the changing role of public and private initiatives as far as Barcelona’s knowledge-based urban development is concerned. Second, the paper aims to introduce
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