



Public Space and Social Identity

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As the presentation of this Seminar emphasizes, public art can involve a variety of public places (parks, streets, public buildings) and it can mean sculptures, buildings, street furniture, fountains, bridges and so on. Some of these artistic features can be considered monuments, not so the other ones. As Bohigas said, the monument is the expression of an identity and not a large and rhetoric vacuum constructed to hide problematic facts (Bohigas, 1985).

But, what it means the expression of an identity?, who can decide the type of identity?, or, which is the role of the urban spaces in relation to this identity?

This paper presents some reflections about these questions on the basis of the symbolic urban space concept as a way to generate or consolidate social identities in relation to the environment. An empirical research carried out in a neighborhood of Barcelona and implications for urban art and design will be also presented as derived from the theoretical framework.

urban social identity

We can begin with an example taken from the daily experience. We are in a party and someone introduces a person completely unknown for us. Immediately, we will try to know something about this person. There is a need to identify him to settle common features and to establish a social interaction. So, probably, one of the first questions we ask him will be: Where are you from? or Where

do you live? that's to say, we will try to identify this person on the basis of a spatial categories.

As such, even though from the social psychology discipline there exists an extensive theoretical work on the subject of social identity, seldom social psychologists have concentrated so much attention on environmental aspects and the role of physical surroundings in the genesis, development or maintenance of the social identity.

First, it seems necessary to take into account the generally accepted idea that social identity is basically derived from the belonging to or affiliation to precise categories such as social groups, socio-professional categories, ethnic groups, religions, nationals, etc. with which individuals identify themselves and which generate a group of internal attributions and external attributions that define the make up of this identity. However, They appear as axes from which social urban identity are formed, as a substructure of social identity.

Furthermore, this mechanism of spatial categorial identification develops as an essentially dynamic process. Individuals are able to identify on the basis of different levels of categorial abstraction, depending on definite conditions where the interaction occurs. So, social spatial identity will depend on what both internal attributions and external which define a categorization were at the same level of abstraction and on salient categories to each other. For example, we are able to identify as an inhabitant of a neighborhood and, on the basis of this category, differ us from the other ones: a) who don't belong to our



neighborhood, b) who know something about it, and c) who are capable to identify them with their neighborhood too.

Instead, if we would identify us using this urban categorization in the presence of a stranger who doesn't know our neighborhood, we must use the more inclusive category «city», so that he will be able to define him with belong to his city. Both, however, need to have any previous knowledge about the categorial dimensions used in the interaction. This knowledge about the most salient dimensions are not necessary an «in situ» one about a definite neighborhood, area or city.

Two elements can, outstandingly, be converted into representative symbols of a social urban identity of a group or a community: the name of the social urban category under which it is identified and defined a precise urban surrounding, and definite places which, because their peculiar characteristics, are recognized as representative of this urban category, at the same time that simbolize some relevant dimensions for such a categorization. These elements are the *symbolic urban spaces*.

urban symbolic spaces

On the basis of this approach, a *symbolic urban space* would be that element of an urban structure, understood as a social category, which identifies a social group linked



with this environment, capable of symbolizing one or quiet a few of the relevant dimensions to this category, and which permits individuals who make up the group perceive themselves as equals in as much as they identify themselves with that space and different from other groups on the basis of the space itself or the categorial dimensions symbolized by this. Thus, some spaces can have the property to facilitate urban social identification processes and can manage to be converted into symbols of identity for the group associated with a definite urban environment. The «environmental imageability» or capacity to elicit a clear and relevant cognitive image (Lynch, 1960) thus as the «social imageability» or characteristics of the set of meanings socially created and spacial attributes (Stokols, 1981) are two of the basic characteristics to define a symbolic urban space. These meanings -or «perceived social field» in Stokols and Shumaker terminology (1981)- can be analysed according to their content, clarity, complexity, heterogeneity (homogeneity), distortions or contradictions (op.cit.). On the other hand, the great importance is recognised which spacial appropriation has (Pol, 1994; Korosec, 1976) through which individuals are already capable of creating or receiving symbolic meanings in space and incorporating them into their own identity. The conceptual relationships established untill now is reflected in FIGURE 1.



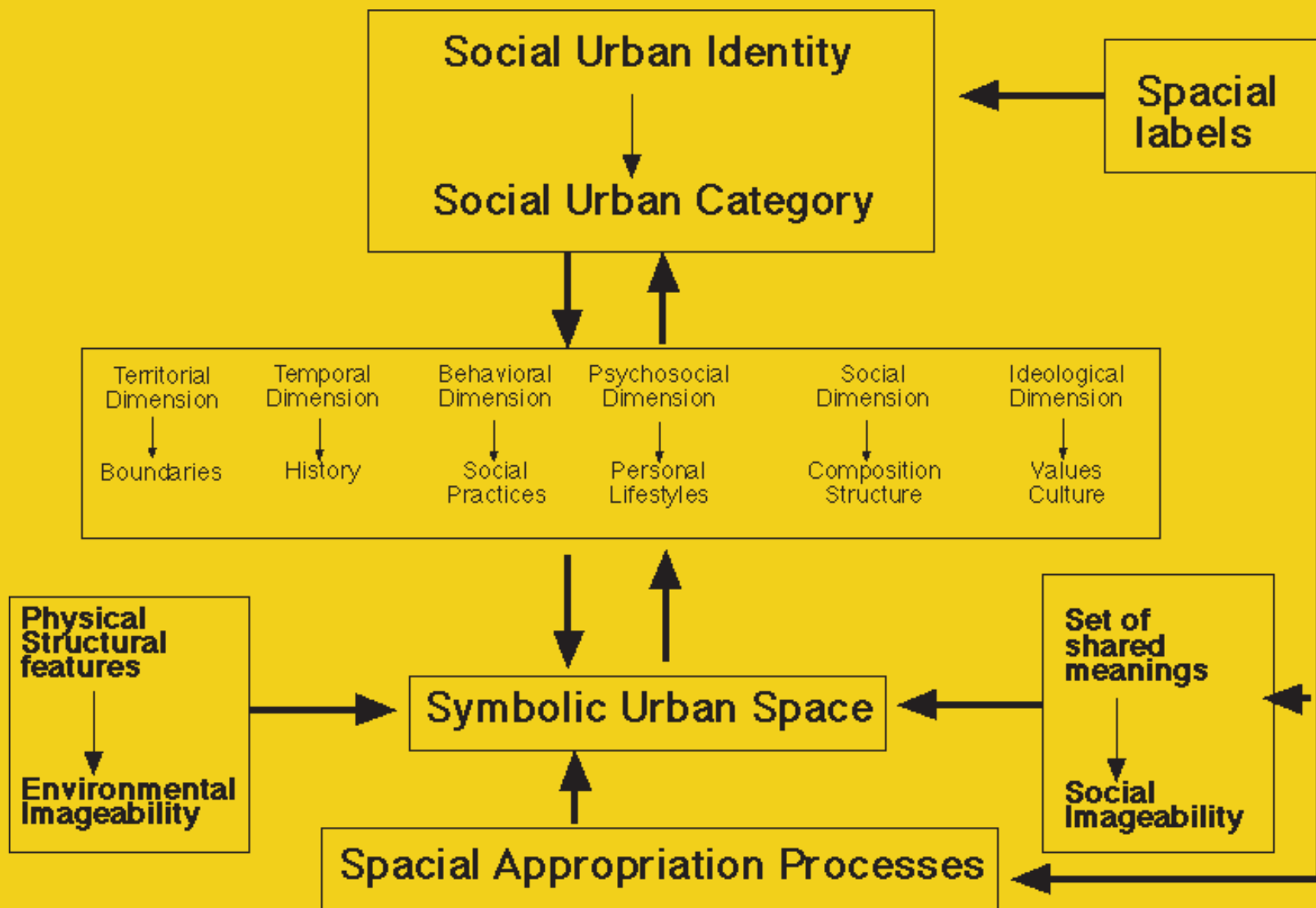


FIGURE 1. The relationship between symbolic urban space and social urban identity from the proposed carried out theoretic.

empirical research

The field which has been chosen for the empirical investigation is the Poblenou neighborhood of the city of Barcelona. This neighborhood, born around 1850, located near the sea and the city center, was known as «The Catalan Manchester» because there were numerous factories, industries and warehouses. Recently, it has been subjected to an important urbanistic remodeling, emphasizing a large residential area built on the occasion of the Olympic Games in 1992 which is called Olympic Village.

methodological procedure

To carry out the investigation, we have opted for a methodological proposal which establishes a triple approach to the object of study: a socio-historical approach based on an investigation and documental analysis, a quantitative approach based on a poll as a means of collecting information and an analysis of this information through statistical methods and, finally, a qualitative approach based on the method of group discussion and on an analysis of the contents of the obtained information. The main variables regarded were:

- (N) Name of the neighborhood
- (L) Boundaries of the neighborhood
- (D) Differences with respect to other neighborhoods
- (R) Most representative places of the neighborhood (R)





- (P) Places most representatives of the past
- (F) Places most representatives of the future
- (FR) Most frequented places

results

Considering the first of these variables, it is fitting to emphasise that 70% of the individuals polled identified their neighborhood as «Poblenou», while 11,6% identified it as «Sant Martí de Provençals». This is the name of the district as such as it was the name of the old town before it was annexed to Barcelona in 1897.

On the other hand, all the discussion groups opted for the first option and all the participants called their neighborhood as «Poblenou». When a groupal agreement was sought, the other options were removed.

In the second place, the characteristics which define the people of the neighborhood are, basically, a communally identified geographical area (territorial dimension), a working class social composition (social dimension), the perception of sharing a common past which identified them (temporal dimension) in addition to some practical social characteristics (behavioral dimension), a radical and liberal ideological tradition (ideological dimension) and, the most marked, a particular way-of-life similar to that found in a village or reduced community (psychosocial dimension). Both the data obtained through the poll (see FIGURE 2) and the information provided by the discussion groups agrees with these ideas.

Differences

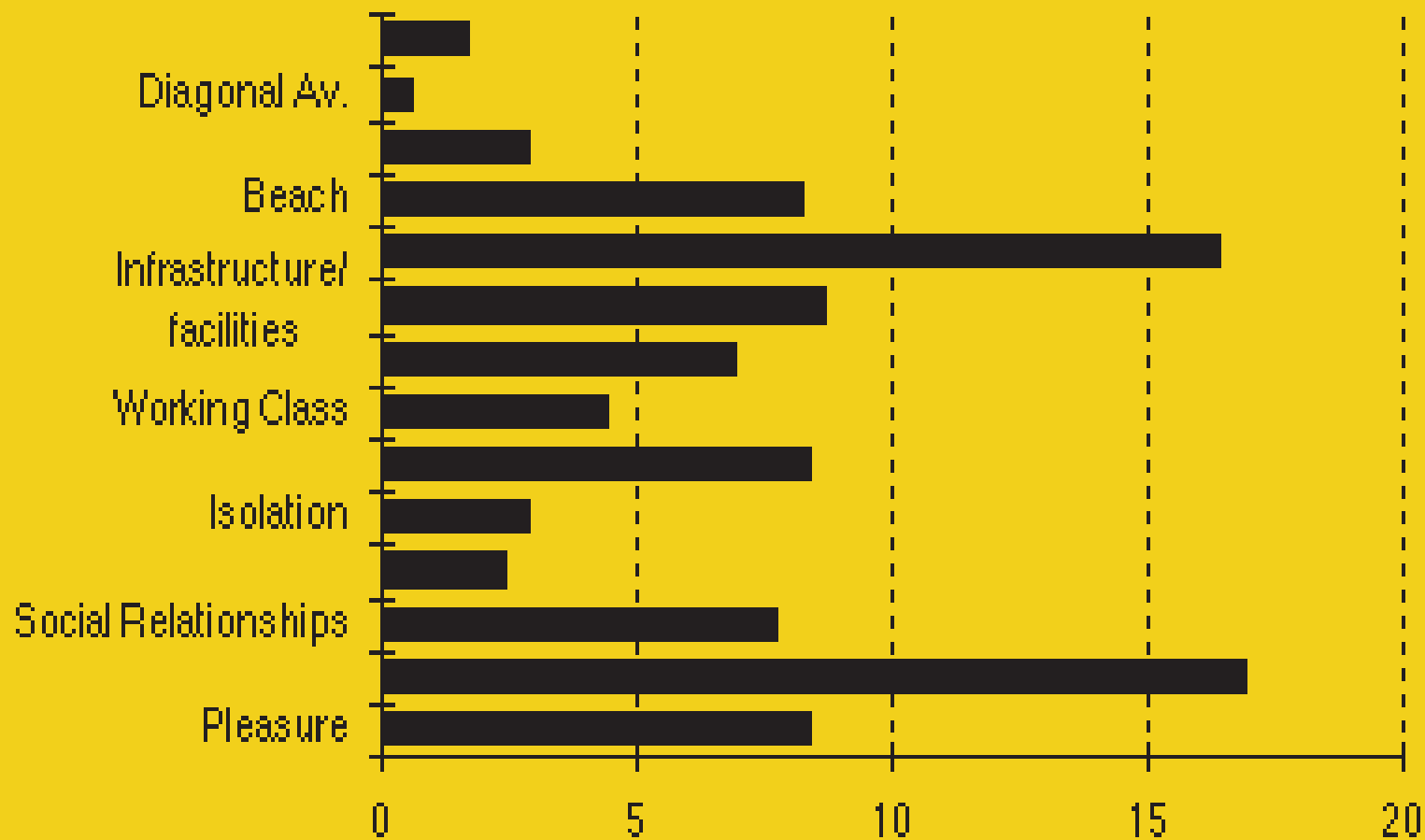


FIGURE 2. Percentages of the configured categories for the variable D.

Especially, we wanted to mention the importance attributed to the psychosocial dimension as a configuring factor to the social urban identity. The fact of perceiving a lifestyle similar to a village appears as a category of particular note in the quantitative approach (see FIGURE 2, category 2). For its part, the analysis of the discussion groups allows to observe how this dimension («this neighborhood is like a little town within Barcelona») is translated into a feeling of familiarity between the residents of the neighborhood («we all know each other», «we are like a family») thus as security and support («You never find yourself alone», «you feel like you are in your own home»). This type of expressions related to the group of the neighborhood, even though surprising to find it in a metropolis like Barcelona, is in keeping with the conferred importance of the neighborhood as an urban environment facilitating social identity (Milgram, 1984; Reid and Aguilar, 1991) or of characteristic life styles (Jacobs, 1961).

symbolic urban spaces.

In the third place it has been possible to detect and analyse definite spaces of the neighborhood which, due to their characteristics, can be defined as symbolic urban spaces, clearly related with the feeling of identity of their inhabitants, specially with respect to temporal dimensions, behavioral and psychosocial. Among those, Rambla del Poblenou Avenue clearly stands out as the most prototypical place (preponderantly recognised as the most representative place of the neighborhood), that which sets out some structural physical characteristics which facili-



tate a clear cognitive and identifiable image (the structure of avenue itself confers these qualities) and as such attributes a great richness and quantity of meanings clearly established and socially shared related in great part with the categorial dimensions previously indicated. (see FIGURE 3).

On the other hand, it has been possible to detect and analyse other places which base their symbolic value on the preservation of the history of the neighborhood, as in the case of Prim Square, the factories (represented by Can Girona and the Water Tower) or the Casino of Poblenou, as a symbol of the associated life of the neighborhood. Finally, places appear whose meaning is associated with the future of the district, especially the Olympic Village, the Sea Park (Marbella beach), Diagonal Avenue or the Sea Front. In general, the symbolic relation with these places is based on a sense of threat perceived about the identity of the neighborhood, since they can generate the arrival of new groups and social classes which provoke a split in the structure, social characteristics and current lifestyles of the people of the neighborhood, generating urban gentrification processes. In fact, we want to emphasise 3 places which in our analysis have turned out to be specially relevant since they appear, to a greater or lesser extent, in the replies to all the main items (variables R, P, F, FR, D). In the first of these, Rambla del Poblenou Avenue can be considered as the symbolic urban space most important to Poblenou or, in other terms, the most prototypical space of the so-



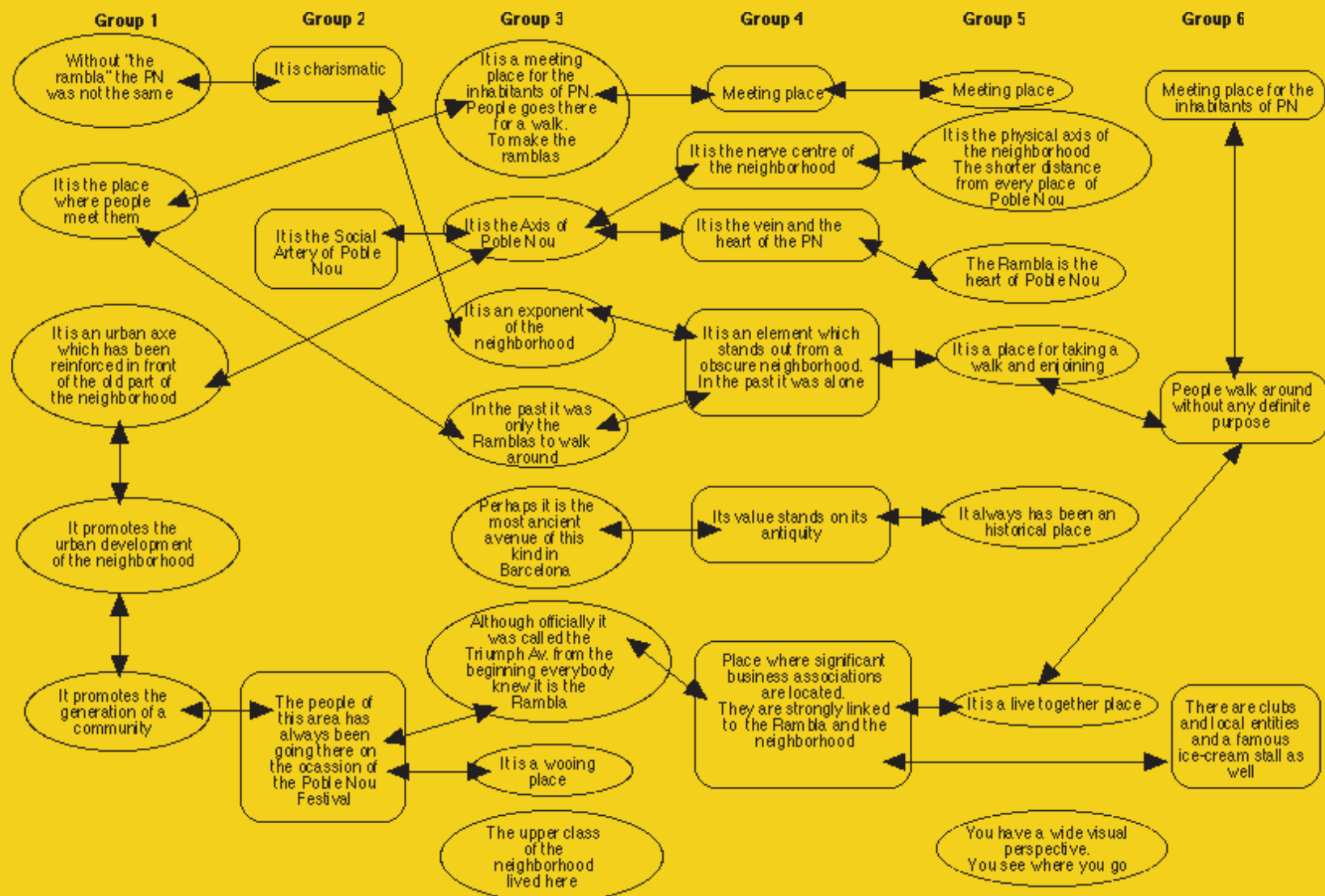
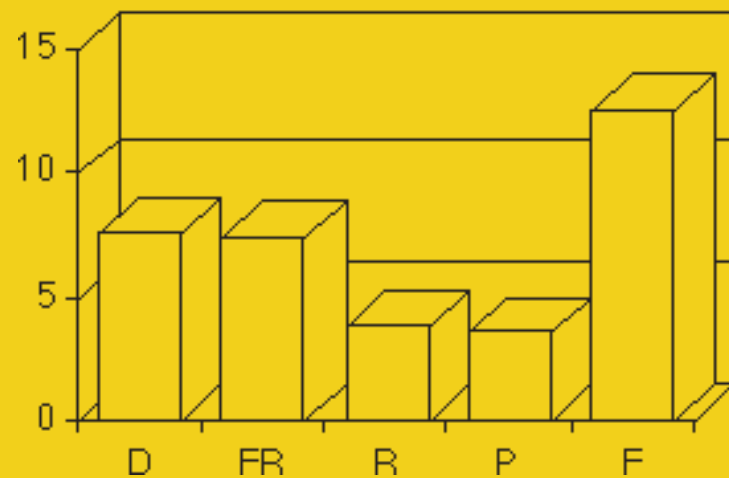
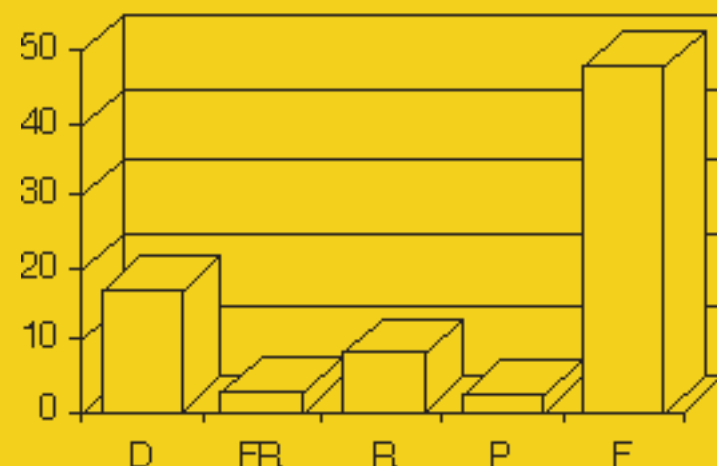


FIGURE 3. The main ideas obtained in the discussion groups referred to «Rambla del Poblenou».

Platja Marbella



Vila Olímpica



Rambla del Poble Nou

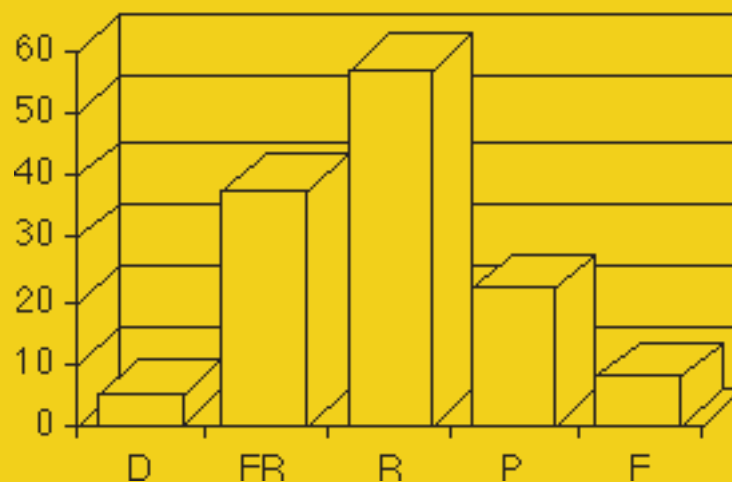


FIGURE 4. Percentages of obtained instances in the variables D, FR, R, P and F for the three places which appear in all the main variables



cial urban category «Poblenou neighborhood» since it accumulates the greater percentage of incidence in 3 out of the 5 variables: as a characteristic or representative place in the district (55,7%), as a place representative of the past (22,6%) and as the place most frequented by the residents of the neighborhood (38,7%). On the other hand, the Olympic Village has an important role as a distinguishing element from the rest of the districts (13,8%) but its most accentuated virtue centers on it being the most representative place for the future of the neighborhood (48,5%), even though from the analysis of the contents it is deduced that this future could threaten the social identity of the neighborhood.

For its part, and even though with fewer percentages, the Marbella Beach also appears in the five variables, specially as a representative element of the future through its recent remodelling (13,4%), with more positive connotations than the Olympic Village.

Finally, in the phase of quantitative analysis we have studied the relationship between the items of the questionnaire and personal variables of the individuals through t-test proofs, analysis of the variance and chi-square test (see TABLE 1). The obtained data allows the observation of the related items to representative places of the district (R) and representative of the past (P) are shown specially useful for detecting symbolic urban spaces. So, we have observed that these are the only items which do not demonstrate significant statistical relationships with any of the personal variables, that is to say, the answers given by the individuals in these items can be considered

	Age	Leghth	Work	Level Study	Occupation	Assoc.Member.	Gender
N	.032	.878	.55040	.00285	.01065	.71384	.64860
D	.023	.0005	.47729	.54462	.01344	.79643	.42306
FR	.0001	.0028	.49160	.10243	.49269	.95205	.01922
F	.0000	.0001	.58613	.00934	.32573	.62132	.64326
R	.34581	.3768	.93207	.58213	.42032	.91196	.19097
P	.2153	.6128	.43745	.15274	.54374	.76517	.65732

TABLE 1. Levels of significance among the main variables and the personal variables regarded on the investigation (age of the individuals, lenght of residence, working in the neighborhood Y/N, level of studies, occupation, membership of any association in the neighborhood Y/N, and gender). SIG.= $p < 0.05$.



as independent to how the individuals are. This one leads us to infer that this statistical effect can hold a narrow relationship with the possible clarity and homogeneity of the underlying meanings to these spaces. The qualitative phase of analysis has allowed a reinforcing of this idea. So, excluding the representative places to the future, the contents of the rest of places regarded by the groups are highly agreed.

conclusions

The investigation carried out on the neighborhood of Poblenou shows three important conclusions for our proposals:

a) a sense of social identity in relation to the neighborhood has been observed, it is to say, the social urban category «neighborhood» appears as a relevant category for the social identity of the inhabitants. So, a boundaries commonly defined (territorial dimension), the consciousness of a common past (temporal dimension), the belongingness to a working class (social dimension), a set of specific social practices (behavioral dimension) and, specially, a particular way-of-life similar to a little town (psychosocial dimension) are the main dimensions which define the social urban identity of the inhabitants of Poblenou.

b) a set of particular places has been regarded as symbolic urban spaces. Strongly, the Rambla del Poblenou Avenue appears as the most important symbolic place. People referred it as a relevant place which symbolize the past of the neighborhood, the present one and the expectations on the future. Furthermore, its perceived social field (set of meanings referred to it) has a relevant content with an important complexity, clarity and homogeneity as well. This homogeneity has could be confirmed through the analysis among the main variables and personal variables; results show the strength of social constructed meanings related to urban spaces. On the other hand, the Olympic Village and Marbella Beach are other symbolic places, specially in relation to the future of the neighborhood.

c) the methodological procedure which has been choosed to carry out this investigation can be regarded as a valid procedure to investigate the subject of social identity from the social created meanings in relation to the urban space. So, the triple approach planed -sociohistorical, quantitative and qualitative- as well as the triangulation of the results obtained from each one has been very useful for our proposals.

Sharing the idea of Amos Rapoport that every time a major disonance is given between urban design and the universal symbolic meanings shared by the users of that space or, in the words of Pol, the introduction of spaces with an «a priori» meaning on the part of instances of



power, we believe that an approximation of the type that is proposed here can contribute interesting elements on reflection for those professionals who, with their design actions on urban planning or art in public spaces, try to bring their objectives closer to the ground of individuals towards which these actions are orientated, and in this way, convert the city into something more accesable and human.



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