

# on the w@terfront



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## **Artist's neighborhoods in Barcelona**

For many years artistic neighbourhoods have been a study object in the Western World. Because of their powerful capacity of social and urban regeneration, they have become an attractive topic for art historians and sociologists. However, this subject is not very often approached in Spain, in spite of the fact that cities like Barcelona and Madrid could offer particularly interesting study cases.

Referring to those in the city of Barcelona, we can track the clear existence of three artists' neighbourhoods. Two of them born out from the influence of the creation of museums of contemporary art in the heart of the city's historic centre; the other one in the once most industrial neighbourhood of the city, made up by the factories which brought progress at the beginning of the century.

In the first place, about those ones sheltered by contemporary art museums, whose paradigmatic model can be found at the Pompidou Museum in Paris, we can mention the neighbourhood of the Raval and the neighbourhood of the Casco Antiguo, both belonging to the district of Ciutat Vella.

In the most Western part of the "Ciutat Vella" we find the neighbourhood of the Raval, which was born little by little as the Roman Barce lona (Barcino), expanded through the countryside area, crossed by important Roman roads. The third Roman wall encompassed this neighbourhood almost entirely, since two fifths of it belonged within it. As the primitive wall didn't disappear, the city was divided in two parts, the Old City, and the new City, known as the Raval. During the Middle Ages the area of the Raval was known as "the neighbourhood of the convents" featuring in that moment more than twenty. This way, the medieval plot of this urban nucleus was traced, and lasted until the eighteen century, when the neighbourhood experienced a radical urban and social change while undergoing a recycling towards the textile sector. From this moment, the Raval became a labour and industrial neighbourhood. At the end of the nineteen century, the neighbourhood suffered a slow and progressive decline when the plan Cerdá disregarded the area almost completely in favour of the new Barcelona.



Performance in the Angels`Square

Until the present time, that process of continuous and marginal degradation has supposed a raw and very hard reality \_a reality that, however, for about four years has been changing in unstoppable way. Only about five years ago going through this sector would have been sheer bravery, due to the vice, delinquency, prostitution, illegal business... it was an absolutely marginal area and unaware to the cosmopolitan Barcelona. In 1995 the beautiful building of Richard Meier, "the pearl of the Raval", was opened as container of the Contemporary Art Museum of Barcelona (MACBa). This brought not only a museographical project, but also a future project for the neighbourhood. It is evident that the installation of this type of museums immediately attracts contemporary art galleries, which settle round these buildings sheltered by such institutional offer. In the Raval neighbourhood, and more concretely in the streets that flow into the Angels' square, warehouses dedicated to avant-garde galleries are found in an almost continuous way (Galeria de los Angeles, Forun Ferlandina, Alter Ego, Espai Vidre, Ferrán Cano...). Today we can see a curious mixture of these galleries and traditional shops owned by immigrants of countless ethnic minorities, seated in the area for years.



Studio «Cocoon» near Picasso's Museum

And this is when artists' studios take the chief role. From this moment young artists start settling in down, hoping that this whole nascent cultural vitality, which is growing around the MACBa, will somehow redound directly in their work. In the Raval we can find more than fifty studios of young, and not so young artists, who moved there just about a year ago approximately, many of whom admit to have chosen the area for the presence of the MACBa. However, it is possible that not even themselves are fully aware of how much they mean to this whole regenerative process. By moving to these housings, to which they give their own original touch, they have become usual clients of traditional and basic business like food stores. This process has turned

the growing population of artists into authentic mediators between the world of the contemporary art galleries, sometimes frivolous and commercial, and the multiracial population who cohabit in the Raval neighbourhood. Furthermore, the presence of these artists in the Raval has brought numerous business related to their world, such as hairdressers of avant-garde style, clothing stores, records' shops, furnishers of fine arts material, bookstores... To this daily activity we should also add, the countless acts which promote the artists work and give life to the neighbourhood, such as night concerts in galleries, and exhibitions in bars, cafes or bookstores, "open workshops day", performances on the street, etc.



*Ferlandina Street, in the Raval*

The social and urban regeneration is evident, it is only necessary to go for a walk around the area to see these changes. That's the reason why associations like FAD (Association for the Promotion of Decorative Arts), the editorial Grupo 68, the University of Journalism Ramón Llull, the noted Escola Massana, the art centre of Santa Mónica, or architects and designers' studios have transferred their head offices to the heart of the Raval.



*Artist's Studio in the Raval*

Another example of artistic neighbourhood generated by placing a contemporary art museum in a certain place is, without a doubt, the one which surrounds the Picasso Museum in Montcada Street. This area of Ciutat Vella, in the middle of the old urban centre, next to the Gothic neighbourhood, is one of the most transited by tourists, the lovers of the avant-garde art and by young people in the late hours. In the surroundings of the Picasso Museum, we find the most alternative galleries in Barcelona (Metronom, Sala Montcada, Espai Blanc, Art BCN, Pretexto...). These galleries settled in these surroundings following the same process as we see in the Raval as well as the countless artists' studios, more than thirty, where we can find some as curious as that of the Japanese Cocon who work with Zen art. The lively day and night life together with the peculiar and fascinating young-artists world have attracted numerous architects and interior designers like HTT Architects, Julia Schulz-Dornburg, graphic designers like Enric Franch or Quim Larrea, and artisan designers workshops like Atlanta Manufacturas or Ricardo Domingo.

An inverse process is the one that's taking place in the neighbourhood of the Poble Nou, located in the south-east of the city, between the Barceloneta and the mouth of the Besós river. Its historical origin goes back to the eighteenth century, when, as a result of the First Industrial Revolution, the first factories were moved away from the inhabited city (the present Ciutat Vella), in an attempt to avoid its insalubrity and to ensure wider spaces. However, it was at the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century, when the new neighbourhood acquired its industrial character, which will mark its urban appearance and its definitive architecture.



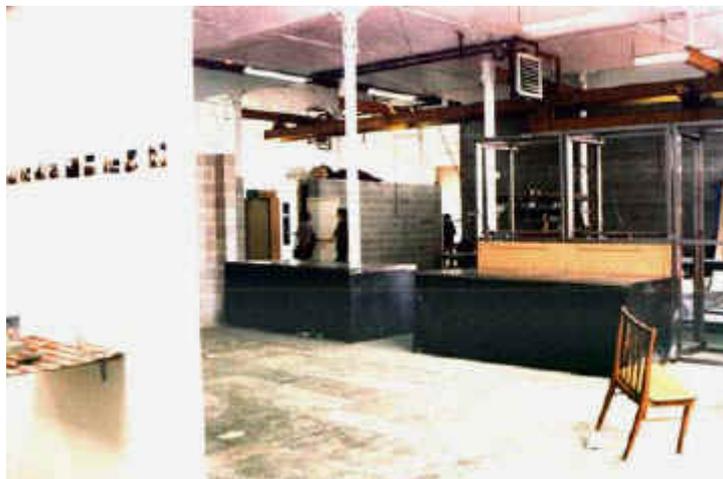
Artist's Studio near Picasso's Museum

Nevertheless, today, the image of the industrial modernity, which was defined for more than a century by the profile of the chimneys of its factories, is vanishing as if the buildings were becoming a "ghost neighbourhood". Enormous and beautiful brick factories, overwhelming and firm, see how the history they sheltered has been forgotten. Protagonists of the industrial revolutions, which transformed Barcelona in the most advanced city of Spain, they wait for someone to rescue their walls from the abandonment they suffer



*Artist's Studio in the Raval*

But again artists can play a main role in the definitive configuration of a regenerative process. It is certain that the institutional initiatives, as the opening of the Avenida Diagonal which crosses the area, are opening up the neighbourhood to the heart of the city, but without a doubt the presence of artists is also accelerating the process, acting as a catalyst. At the beginning of the nineties and without any kind of official support, numerous artists communities gathered in associations (Net Art Públíc Project, Cultural Associació AXA, Hangar, the 12 Visual, 22A, The Submarí...) and established their studios in the old factories, warehouses and lofts. In the same way, the Association of Visual Artists from Catalonia (AAVC) and the Union of Associations of Visual Artists (UAAV) have moved their headquarters to the district, which adds further proof that an avant-garde artists neighbourhood has started to develop. The new ways of cultural expression and the capacity for innovation, together with an unconformist and continually renovated look is pervading this neighbourhood, which only a few years ago seemed deserted. We could venture to announce that the process which aroused in the SoHo of New York in the seventies is going to repeat itself again here in Poble Nou.



*Hangar Association in Poble Nou*

This cultural regeneration parallel to the official plans for urban refurbishment, is the stimulus that really gives life and colour to the ongoing boosting of the neighbourhood, which otherwise might end up like a cold surgical intervention in the urban fabric, which could even bypass the people inhabiting the area. Aware that a new artistic neighbourhood is flourishing, some private companies dedicated to graphic design, architecture and other liberal professions have recently settled down in the area, for example the famous Catalan designer's studio Javier Mariscal or the Winchester School of Art which imparts a master in Fine Arts.

As I said, I believe we are facing the birth of a new artistic neighbourhood and we won't take long to realise how galleries of very alternative and conceptual tendencies settle around these studios. Subsequently the arrival of the planned museums and institutional venues devoted to contemporary culture, preferably with a multidisciplinary stand, will give more presence to the arts sector and raise the profile of this artists' neighbourhood. In the meantime, the place, animated not only by the variegated activities that the neighbourhood is already boasting (like the "open workshops day", alternative theatre, concerts, recitals of poetry), will be repopulated not only by more artist and galleries, but also by special shops, by cafes and fashion shops, or other businesses dedicated to the image (designer sheets, hairdresser etc...)... at the same time as the wealthy patrimony of Poble Nou, the so called "industrial archaeology" would have been conserved and reused.

Finally, as a closing remark it is important to state that, if the role of official institutions will be undoubtedly indispensable to redevelop this area, this should be understood in artistic terms and with art promotion goals. Not only is important to control urban speculation and to improve urban infrastructure, which in some way it is already happening, but even more important should be to help artists in the most practical way, in other words, commissioning works of art from them. Public art produced and created by the artists who inhabit these neighbourhoods not only is economically more profitable, but it is rather a well proved beneficial method for all parts. For artists this is the best way to expose and make their work known. For neighbours it is a chance to learn about how to appreciate the current art, which is normally difficult for most people in general, and through the daily contact with artists, they end up feeling proud of it. For all of us it is also beneficial, because the embellishment of cities, is without doubt, a pleasure for the senses.