

The Lost Shantytowns of Barcelona

Subjects: Urban Studies

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Shantytowns still existed in many of Southern Europe's major cities in the second half of the 20th century, although many have now been demolished. The purpose of this article is to highlight the history and evolution of some of the main shantytowns that remained in Barcelona in the mid-1970s, track their subsequent demolition, and reflect on the fate of the shanty dwellers. This form of self-build housing, usually lacking in basic services, played a vital role in providing shelter for immigrant families and the urban poor. A strong neighbourhood identity existed in many of these shantytowns, and national and local policies that aimed at their demolition and the re-housing of residents, often in low-quality housing blocks, proved problematic. The shantytowns studied here are La Perona, the Tres Turons, Campo de la Bota, and Ramon Casellas, which together comprised over 2000 shanty dwellings in the 1970s. Drawing on photographs taken at the time and existing literature, and using recent images from Google Earth, the demise of these shantytowns is examined, and the policies and plans that determined their fate are discussed. This article finds that the shanty dwellers experienced mixed fortunes, some being forcibly removed and re-housed in tower blocks with associated social-economic problems, whilst others played an active part in the design of replacement housing, implemented in situ where the shanty dwellings once existed. This article contributes to existing studies on shantytowns in Barcelona, which received scant attention from academics at the time, and which only now are being recognised as an important aspect of Barcelona's urban history.

Keywords: shantytown ; barracas ; coreas ; shanty dwellers ; housing estate ; re-housing ; housing policy ; urban renewal

Barcelona today is a thriving modern city of almost 5.7 million in 2024, renowned for its progressive approach to urban renewal and utilisation of digital technologies in the provision of urban services. Its rich urban history includes the urban plan and science of Ildefonso Cerdà ^[1], seen by some as the father of modern urban planning, and the architectural creations of Antonio Gaudi and Lluís Domènech i Montaner, amongst others. As an urban space, it provides a unique blend of old city charm around the *Ramblas*, and the polycentric development of the 19th century *ensanche*, the city expansion beyond the old medieval walls, based on the unique eight-sided *manzanas* (blocks), dotted with modern service infrastructure and architectural gems such as the *Sagrada Família* cathedral. It is seen by many as a modern city *par excellence*, and some authors see in its urban management a “Barcelona model” that differentiates the city from other major urban centres ^[2].

However, at the time of the death of Franco in 1975—marking the end of an era of dictatorship and the start of the transition to democracy—the urban landscape in Barcelona was somewhat different. There remained several shantytowns, areas of illegal dwellings constructed in the main by the residents themselves, with the individual dwellings usually called *barracas* or *coreas*. UN-Habitat ^[3] defines a shantytown as an illegal or unauthorised settlement characterised by substandard housing made up of plastic sheets, corrugated metal, or cardboard boxes.

Camino et al. ^[4] (p. 18), however, suggest the term may include more substantial structures, seeing shanty developments as representing “a process of informal appropriation of land to build substandard housing (without prior planning for the land, lacking infrastructure, built with wood, mud, brick and/or recycled materials) as a spontaneous response to a lack of accessible housing in urban areas”. In this context, a *corea* is sometimes seen as a sturdier structure than a *barraca*, and usually a little larger, generally made of brick and cement and may even have a tiled roof, almost akin to a tiny bungalow. The two terms are often used interchangeably and here we will use the term *barraca* in the main.

In a wider context, shantytowns are a global phenomenon, with some of the largest settlements found in India (Dharavi), Mexico (Ciudad Neza), and Pakistan (Orangi). Most of these shanties started life as the type of sub-standard dwellings noted above, rapidly put together by the inhabitants themselves, and generally devoid of adequate services. Over time, however, some of them have been improved to a significant degree by the residents, often working with local authorities, NGOs, and community organisations.

Not only have services such as water, electricity, and sewage systems been installed, but schools and community centres have been provided, and the dwellings themselves have been upgraded. In a few instances—as is the case in the Los

Olivos neighbourhood in Lima, Peru—the shantytown has been transformed to such a degree that it has become an established community and part of the formal urban fabric of the city ^[5]. Today, some authors ^[6] view upgraded shantytowns as a viable solution to housing shortages in major cities.

In Europe, the growth of shanty developments in the 20th century can be viewed as a feature of post-industrialisation and the associated mass country–city migration. As Vorms ^[7] (para. 2) notes, “the period of intense urbanization between the 1920s and 1960s was accompanied, especially in the cities of Southern Europe, with the development of poor peripheries that lacked facilities and services, and consisted of small fragile buildings built in violation of regulations. A new lexicon appeared everywhere to designate these materially and legally precarious neighborhoods: *bidonvilles* in France, *baracche* in Rome, *chabolos* (shacks) in Madrid, and *barracas* in Barcelona”. Vorms ^[7] (para. 1) also observes that “as sites of an impoverished and difficult life, they embodied the flip side of this period of widespread improvement in living conditions”.

Barcelona attracted large numbers of workers in the early decades of the 20th century, and with limited attention being given to the housing problem by local or state authorities, the number of shanty dwellings tripled between 1914 and 1922, rising from 1218 to 3859 in this period ^[8]. The situation was exacerbated when, in 1929, the port development authority—the Zona Franca Consortium—obtained the houses and land around the southern side of Montjuïc (the hill overlooking the city from the southwest) through compulsory purchase, forcing the residents—largely fishermen and unskilled labourers—to construct their own residences.

From then on, *barracas* became a feature of the city, with up to 20,000 existing in the 1950s in the Barcelona municipality alone. “Shantyism in Barcelona, an urban phenomenon which unfolded over the course of the 20th century, created an informal city beside the planned city This informal city extended across Montjuïc hill and along the seafront, occupying both the hills and some interstitial spaces on the periphery of the *Ensanche*” ^[9] (p. 3).

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