

The Evolution of the *Movimentos de Vecinos* in Barcelona

by Tom Angotti and Nico Calavita

This year Barcelona's *La Federació de Associacions de Vecinos de Barcelona* (FAVB), or Federation of Neighborhood Associations, celebrated its fortieth anniversary, making it perhaps the oldest surviving citywide coalition in a major metropolis. But the most important aspect of this milestone for our readers is not the coalition's impressive size or duration but its long history of progressive and left politics focused on local and global issues. From anti-fascism in the final years of the Franco dictatorship to today's diverse battles against large-scale development projects, for environmental quality and in defense of human rights, there is much to be celebrated on FAVB's anniversary even as it now faces the challenges associated with the transition to a new generation of leadership.



FAVB today includes ninety-five neighborhood and eight block associations. The federation is a player in legislative reforms while it opposes the newest generation of megaprojects, including a tunnel, aquarium and luxury hotel. While the federation backs local neighborhood issues, it has not been shy about taking positions on citywide and national policy. For example, in addition to struggling for the right to housing and democratic participation, FAVB also supports women's reproductive rights. According to activist Lourdes Ponce ("Pitusa"), "We won't be entirely content until equal rights are recognized." FAVB opposes the U.S. war in Iraq and supports the right to housing. On some issues its stance is explicitly anti-capitalist.

As a featured speaker and participant in a series of public discussions on urban issues organized for the FAVB anniversary commemoration, Tom Angotti had the opportunity to visit *Nou Barris*, one of the most combative working-class neighborhoods in Barcelona. Here a major housing project was planned with neighborhood engagement, then built, after a long fight against a city-sponsored urban removal plan. A major plaza was designed with local participation after a city proposal was rejected. Local associations also fought for new and better services, including a major cultural and recreational center for youth.

One of the most impressive and telling innovations in *Nou Barris* is its annual Soup Festival (*Festival de las Sopas*). This isn't just a culinary event but a conscious effort to celebrate the neighborhood's exceptional cultural diversity and reject anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic prejudices infecting Spanish society. Recipes in the book of soups published by the association are by immigrants from Africa, Latin America, Asia, Oceania and other parts of Europe, as well as by native Barcelonans. The Soup Festival is

a prime example of the continuing vitality of Barcelona's progressive neighborhood-based movements.

While the veterans of neighborhood struggles speak proudly of their accomplishments, many acknowledge that the calls by younger generations for change have to be heeded. Some associations have mellowed and lost their radical roots and are clearly in need of revival. In the case of others, there is new energy from the younger environmental and neighborhood activists and a strong commitment to continuing the political focus on peace and human rights. Most importantly, several younger activists such as Marc Andreu, an editor of FAVB's magazine, have been keeping alive the history of the movement even as they report on its current status.

FAVB's Origins and the Right to the City

Until the end of Franquismo in 1975, urban movements in Spain had to operate in an environment where speaking out could lead to imprisonment, or worse. At the same time, when the dictatorship began to crumble, urban movements served as a concrete and highly visible target for the opposition. The repressive nature of the Franco regime weakened during its final years, possibly due in part to the political mobilizations by urban social movements, workers, students and movements for regional autonomy, all of which functioned as a loose network. Surreptitiously backed by a significant portion of the press, the Barcelona social movement quickly became an alternative forum for the discussion of urban and political affairs.

LEFT: Carrer, The Magazine of FAVB, 40th Anniversary Issue

RIGHT: A Public Plaza in Nou Barris

The urban social movements in Spain used direct action and protest tactics, had a grassroots orientation and kept a certain distance from political parties, which were clandestine until the mid-1970s. The neighborhood associations arose in response to everyday problems specific to particular neighborhoods, including traffic, unpaved streets and water supply, which made life more difficult for working people. At the end of the 1960s, the urban social movements grew quickly, in parallel with the rapid urbanization and densification of the city, making visible the shortages of public facilities and the neglect of urban space in the new and old urban peripheries.

The initial forms of protest included the collection of signature, assemblies, expositions, gatherings around sport or music events and symbolic inaugurations. The habitual response of the city administration was silence. As problems persisted, more militant forms of struggle ensued, even in a context where basic freedoms were not guaranteed. Organizing was difficult, but, as historian Manuel Naya pointed out in his 1996 chapter "The Neighborhood Associations," it

meant much more: getting the authorities to give us a set of traffic lights meant forty days of barricades and stopping cars coming into the district where four or five fatal accidents had taken place. And that meant clashes with the police. Demanding mains for the shacks in Torre Baro' meant cutting off the motorways into Barcelona everyday, with everything that involved. It was a difficult time.



Photo by Tom Angotti

Other forms of struggle included the occupation of public spaces, human barriers, sequestering buses and rent strikes.

Shaping Planning for the Benefit of the Neighborhoods

By the late 1960s, the city sought to update Barcelona's 1953 master plan. The new *Comarcal Plan*, initially approved in 1974 and finalized in 1976, was an exceptionally advanced plan, in part the result of a new group of architects, planners and engineers who reconnected to urban planning ideas in democratic countries, especially Italy. Two elements in the new plan stand out: it reduced allowable densities from a potential of nine million people to four and half million and reclaimed land for public use by designating various parcels for parks, plazas, schools and other public facilities. About half of the land designated for public use under the previous plan had been used for speculative housing projects.

The new Barcelona mayor attempted to establish a dialogue with the neighborhood associations and made regular visits to the poorest neighborhoods. When the new plan was unveiled a few months after his inauguration, however, it was attacked by the *Asociaciones* because they felt that not enough areas had been designated for public use and because new thoroughfares were proposed that would cut through some of the historic neighborhoods, such as *Gracia*, and affect thousands of homes. The 1974 plan became the vehicle through which the citizen movements were consolidated, strengthening their resolve to stop further deterioration of their city.

The plan gave rise to such passionate conflicts that the central government decided to send in a hard-line mayor. The neighborhood groups, with the support of professional associations, including architects, rose to the occasion and took to the streets. They demanded the elimination of roads that cut through their neighborhoods and the redesignation to public use areas that had been changed to private use, such as the *España Industrial*, a huge complex of abandoned textile factories. As a result of the actions of the *Asociaciones*, the thoroughfares were eliminated, but many of the

other objections were not met and the master plan was approved in the summer of 1976. Realizing that their chances of success would be nil with the current mayor, the *Asociaciones* turned their energies towards a campaign to force his removal, demanding his resignation from the king, the minister of internal administration, and the governor of Barcelona. In December 1976 the mayor resigned and a new "conciliatory" mayor took his place. The battle for the plan continued through the courts, and some of the worst excesses of the plan were changed by executive action, including the *España Industrial* site, which was redesignated as parkland, raising the ire of the owner, who went so far as to call for a coup d'état.

Barcelona's new mayor, who held office during the transition from Franquismo, opened up a space for dialogue with the associations. He decided to acquire the areas designated for public use. A series of favorable circumstances—the fear of property owners that a left government would seize their property, an economic recession that lowered land prices and additional funds from the central government—allowed for a greater than expected amount of land to be secured for the public.

Cooptation?

Despite the strong insistence of the *Asociaciones* on municipal elections, they did not take place until four years after Franco's death. The left won, and a socialist, Narcis Serra, was elected mayor of Barcelona. Many of the members of the *Asociaciones* and the professional organizations that supported them were elected to City Council or entered the new administration. The two main tasks of the newly elected government were to reform its public administration and respond to calls for redevelopment of the city. A new planning director, Oriol Bohigas, quickly responded to the demands of the neighborhoods by seizing the opportunity offered by the newly acquired land. Bohigas was the catalyst that brought together a large number of young architects who had entered the profession during the 1970s to design almost two hundred parks, plazas, schools and other public facilities. Because of the recent approval of the master plan,

Bohigas did not have to spend time to prepare a new plan, but could devote his energies to implementing it. In a few years, most of the needed public facilities had been built.

At this time the urban social movements in Barcelona and other Spanish cities lost much of their momentum, power and membership. There are several reasons for this sudden change. First, the movements lost their most important *raison d'être* with the completion of many of the needed projects. Second, the demands of the *Asociaciones* had been part of a larger political opposition to the Franco regime. Now, with the democratization of the political system in general and a socialist administration in particular—composed to a large extent of former members or sympathizers of the *Asociaciones de Vecinos*—opposition withered. Throughout Spain, urban political movements came practically to a standstill.

One of the hopes of the *Asociaciones*, that the new administration would install a more participatory form of democracy, remained unfulfilled. The president of the FAVB, Carles Prieto, told a reporter in 1982: “The political parties of the governing coalition have abandoned the *Asociaciones de Vecinos*.” Since then, the FAVB has been critical of all the left administrations that continued to govern the city, but ironically, it continues to operate in offices and with funds provided by those same administrations.

The neighborhood movement was a powerful critic of the iconic 1992 Barcelona Olympics, which were very successful in improving the city’s infrastructure and redeveloping many areas. The FAVB lamented the lack of citizen involvement in the affairs of the city and was particularly sharp in its criticism of how the Olympics was an affair between only the “prince” (as in the Renaissance, the prince being Mayor Maragall in charge of the preparation for the Olympics) and the “architects of the prince.”

That sense of alienation of the neighborhoods from city hall continued under Maragall’s successors, as the city pursued with relentless energy its

encouragement of tourism and construction of hotels, some of them in questionable locations. While Barcelona has been successful at marketing the city as a destination for tourists and global cultural events, many of its inhabitants feel that the city is not theirs anymore. Tourists and international investors seem to matter more than the residents and the communities where they live and work. While the continuing presence of the neighborhood movements remains a key factor in local politics, many infrastructure and quality-of-life improvements are a result not of demands for community-based planning and development, but gentrification pressures and the city’s desire to market itself as an urban innovator and hip tourist destination. Still, a new generation of community activists is attempting to redefine livability as they fight against the exclusion of new immigrants from public space and housing opportunities, advocate for better bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure and in general reformulate the agenda in the long-term struggle for the right to the city.

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