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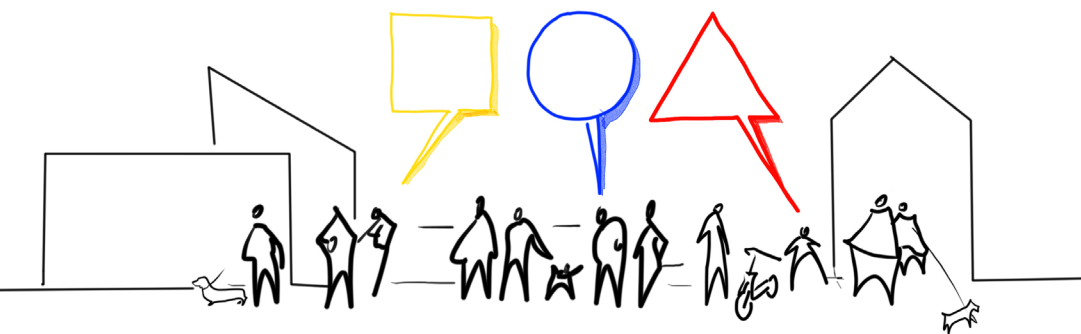
ECTP-CEU

European Council of Spatial Planners
Conseil européen des urbanistes

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2021 Young Planners
Workshop

CITY REBOOT:

POST-PANDEMIC PLANNING AND
THE NEW EUROPEAN BAUHAUS



Athens, Greece



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INTRODUCTION

About ECTP-CEU

ECTP-CEU (the European Council of Spatial Planners – Conseil Européen des Urbanistes), founded in 1985, brings together 40 000 spatial planners with 27 professional town planning associations and institutes from 25 European countries.

It is an umbrella association providing its members with a common framework for planning practice, planning education, continuing professional development and the definition of professional responsibilities.

ECTP-CEU sets standards of education and conduct for the planning profession; identifies, celebrates and rewards examples of good planning all over Europe; and engages in dialogue with local, national and European governments.

In accordance with these objectives, the initiative of the Young Planners' Workshop seeks to set out young planners' perspectives and experiences within the context of new European paradigm.

About 2021 Workshop

The topic relies on the New European Bauhaus initiative launched in order to open the door to a more holistic approach to our built environment, seeking to combine design, sustainability, accessibility, affordability, and investment to help deliver the European Green Deal and to enhance, at the same time, economic, social, environmental and cultural values. This Initiative sets out the shared values regarding sustainability, aesthetics, and inclusiveness.

The 2021 Young planners workshop's primary purpose is to identify and collect best practice examples and innovative projects and ideas, both in practice and education. In that manner, the workshop should serve

as an information platform to actively engage young professionals and academics to rethink and discuss post-pandemic city and reach a large audience via ECTP member organisations.

City reboot refers to the act or an instance of starting anew or making a fresh start on the Bauhaus ideas.

Covid-19 crisis, using equitable recovery planning across Europe backed by broader resilience, renewal, and growth programs, which should be taken as a starting ground for the Workshop.

In this workshop, the ECTP-CEU seeks to contribute to the debate on the ability of planning to find innovative ways of balancing spatial and urban development with sustainability, aesthetics, and inclusiveness in the post-pandemic world. The essential ECTP-CEU goal is to contribute to the Co-design phase of the New European Bauhaus by sharing successful examples in the planning domain and create a starting ground for developing new ideas that could be further submitted within New European Bauhaus pilots, supported by specific calls for proposals.

This workshop seeks innovative projects from participating countries which manage this complex relationship, and we ask that they be brought as exemplars for learning between nations. These might include:

- sharing innovative examples of planning practice, theory and education aimed at the creation of beautiful, sustainable, inclusive living
- sharing innovative ideas – investigating and providing understanding of relevant theories, concepts, theoretical models, instruments of both planning and governance that can reboot the city and provide more beautiful, sustainable and inclusive living environment.
- addressing challenges that prevent us from living together in harmony with ourselves and with the environment in the post-pandemic world.

From the Program of the Workshop.

PROCESS



PAPERS

TITLE

BARCELONA'S POST-PANDEMIC
PLANNING. MAY SUPERBLOCKS
BE FEASIBLE SOLUTIONS
TOWARDS THE NEW EUROPEAN
BAUHAUS?

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Keywords:

post-COVID-19
city | urban
regeneration
| right to
the city |
NextGenerationUE

ABSTRACT

This work approaches the post-Covid-19 city to reflect on the state of the art of the Barcelona's approach of Superblock. The basic hypothesis is the following: Superblock, along with the concepts of the 15-minute city and tactical urbanism, can be a feasible solution to renew the existing built environment as it actually combines accessibility, affordability, design, investment, resilience and sustainability according to European Green Deal.

The work deals with the case study of Barcelona's Superblocks and its primordial application in the Poblenou district. Despite being a pre-pandemic solution, I will demonstrate that this model is suitable to be included in the New European Bauhaus as Superblocks contribute to develop a healthier, safer and more ecologically and socio-economic balanced city in response to the 2020 pandemic outbreak. In order to do so, I will provide the interpretation of the Barcelona's 'Superblock' implemented in Poblenou district as a short-term solution for providing an innovative way of carrying out urban development at a neighborhood scale, mitigating the pandemic negative effects and how this model may succor health, social, and economic inequities. Through a specific fieldwork, interviews and desk research activity, I specifically focus on the impacts of this model in terms of accessibility, affordability, design, investment, resilience and sustainability.

Barcelona is currently integrating the Covid-19 recovery context with long-term-strategy development updates, using the UN 2030 Agenda of SDGs as a roadmap. One of these strategies refers to Superblocks, thought as a social unit, a tight-knit community with shared common facilities, resilient against the stresses of climate change and social vulnerability. By the analysis of the Poblenou's Superblock unit I search to demonstrate how local government implement the concept of Superblock in the city and the ways in which communities are responding to or resisting such interventions.

1. INTRODUCTION

The objective of the research is to understanding the state of the art of the implementation of Superblocks in the city of Barcelona and its impacts at urban level by taking into consideration the specific case study of Poblenou neighbourhood unit. This analysis aims to partially fill the gap of knowledge on the role this new urban design plays in mitigating the effects of COVID-19 and whether this model is suitable to be included in the New European Bauhaus in terms of developing a healthier, safer and more ecologically and socio-economic balanced city.

As no large public survey has still been released on these aspects, I am trying to overcome the substantial lack of scientific research by quantitatively and qualitatively addressing of Superblocks features in terms of healthier, safer, accessible and inclusive cities. The work comprises a theoretical background to contextualize the concept of Superblocks, the examination of the solution offered by Barcelona's Superblocks, and the case study analysis. I used three diverse ways to obtain the information. First, archival research, i.e., Barcelona's archives, especially the Sant Martí District Archive (*Arxiu Municipal del Districte de Sant Martí*) where the Poblenou neighbourhood unit is located. Second, i.e., on-site visits (2017, 2018 and 2019) and on-line interviews with Superblock's residents and non-residents (June 2021). Eventually, the search for international scientific literature using the bibliographic databases Scopus and JSTOR along with the grey literature (i.e., press

articles, government's legislative documents, and local administrations' urban and territorial planning sources) was performed.

I acknowledge that the research on one Superblock is fraught with complexities and lacunae due to the lack of data of Covid-19 contagious rate in a single neighbourhood unit and the impossibility to conduct on-site visits in 2020 and 2021. It is also true that the New European Bauhaus is at its beginning and does not provide robust theoretical framework. Nevertheless, this research may be an important step toward developing a comparative analytical framework focused on sustainability, inclusion, and aesthetics, combined with the citizen-centric approach for the evaluation of the experience of living in an already consolidated Superblock during a pandemic.

2. Theoretical background

Following the increasing awareness to provide healthier, safer, accessible and inclusive cities (Tulchinsky and Varavikova, 2014), the EU presented in December 2019 the European Green Deal¹, whose implementation is being delivered by the so-called New European Bauhaus². The roadmap for making the EU's economy sustainable responding to climate and environmental challenges seemed to be just sped up by the 2020 pandemic outbreak (OECD, 2020).

Superblocks, along with the concept of the 15-minute city and tactical urbanism (Fabris et al., 2020), appear as a proper solution towards a more holistic approach to our built environment, seeking to combine design, sustainability, accessibility, affordability, and investment to help deliver the European Green Deal and to enhance, at the same time, economic, social, environmental and cultural values. Superblocks match the European Green Deal as they are human-centred groups of a number of blocks that reduce the amount of public space dedicated to private cars in the streets to give it back to people. They provide facilities at the level street in combination with green solutions to improve healthier open spaces. First coined by William Drummond in 1916, the neighbourhood unit is credited to Clarence Perry (1929) taking inspiration from the 'Garden Cities of Tomorrow' of Ebenezer Howard (1902) (Johnson, 2002). In Barcelona this concept was originally proposed by Oriol Bohigas in the late 1950s (Bohigas, 1958: p. 474-475) to deal with the fast and uncontrollable growth of the city. Fifty years later, Salvador Rueda got the Superblocks back under the so-called 'Ecological Urbanism' (Rueda, 2014). Though in the pre-pandemic period as a solution to improve the quality of citizens' life and urban environment, can Superblocks positively influence the environmental factors that play a major role on SARS-CoV-2 transmission?

Since the 2020 pandemic outbreak, growing epidemiological studies are assessing that COVID-19-infected patients residing in areas having a high air pollution index and extreme meteorological conditions have higher risk of mortality in comparison with those who are living in areas having a lower air pollution index and more balanced meteorological conditions (Copat et al., 2020; Hu et al., 2021) Kumar et al., 2021). Also, several analyses found that the COVID-19 mostly hits deprived neighbourhoods (Plümper and Neumayer, 2020; Carrión et al., 2021) and exacerbated ongoing urban issues, such as socio-spatial segregation (Alexandri and Janoschka, 2020). Albeit cities are regarded as heart of infections, Hamidi, Sabouri and Ewing (2020) claimed that there is apparently is no significant relationship between population density, degree of transmissibility, and mortality. The urban focus of solutions aiming at recovering from the loss of amenity is thus justified by demographic factors, the majority of world's population are and will be living in cities (Ashton and Thurston, 2017).

The global city of Barcelona is suffering from longstanding problems of air pollution (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2015; Mueller et al. 2017) and cramped living conditions (Blanco and Nel-lo , 2018), but it is working towards the renewal of its spaces following the UN 2030 Agenda of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)³. In fact, in the early 2020 Barcelona introduced the Climate Emergency Action Plan to tackle issues related to mobility and renewable energy . Superblocks are among the relevant measures proposed and the pandemic has made this new urban design more urgent to shape the lives and well-being of its inhabitants by the reduction of air pollution index and frequency and intensity of heat waves. Current literature have dealt with a number of aspects of Superblocks: Rueda (2019) and Mueller et al. (2020) quantitatively assessed the overall impacts of Superblocks system; Palència et al. (2020) evaluated the health effects; Scudellari, Staricco and Vitale Brovarone (2020), Zografos, C. et al. (2020) and Benini, Manzini and Parameswaran (2021) questioned the struggle

NOTE 1

https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en

NOTE 2

https://europa.eu/new-european-bauhaus/index_en

NOTE 3

<https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/agenda2030/en>

NOTE 4

<https://www.barcelona.cat/barcelona-pel-clima/en/barcelona-responds/climate-emergency-committee>

to apply the approach of Superblocks respectively in terms of urban design, urban politics and governance, and digitalisation, while López, Ortega and Pardo (2020) focused on the impacts on mobility and climate change.

The implementation of Barcelona's Superblocks

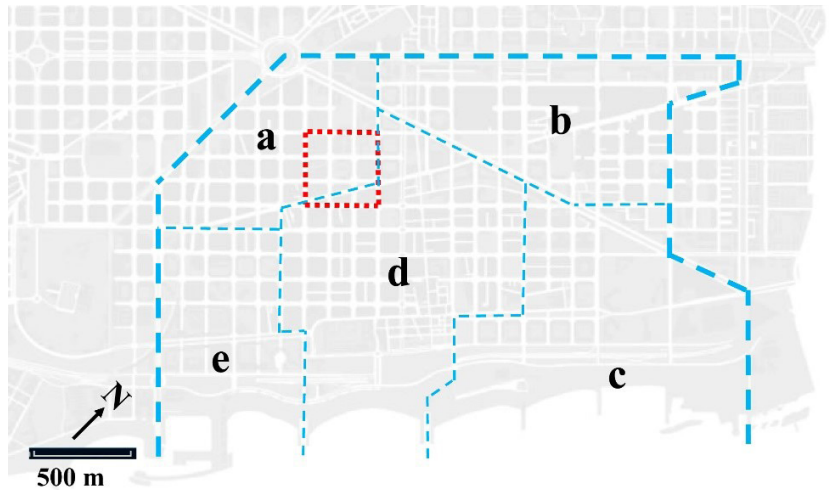
The implementation of Superblocks system would cover the entire city's land, creating 503 urban cells by 2030 and its health impact would be the prevention of 667 premature deaths annually. Rueda (2019) and Mueller et al. (2020) quantitatively assessed this impact by assuming that the 503 Superblocks would reduce private motorised transport by 19.2% and increase green surfaces from 2.7 m²/inhabitant to 6.3 m²/inhabitant in the Extension district zone. All this would decrease NO₂ pollution by 24% and heat waves by 35.9%. Thought as a specific tactical urbanism series of action that would cost 100 million euros, the implementation of Superblocks system is far to be completed: just six Superblocks took place from September 2016 to mid-2021. However, the 2020 pandemic outbreak gave city authorities the chance to accelerate these experiments (figure 1). As a matter of fact, a public expenditure of approximately €38 million is supporting the conversion of most of Barcelona's Extension district in a great Superblock by the end of 2023⁵. This targeting area is a priority due to its critical levels of pollution (50 micrograms/m³ on average in 2019, when the WHO recommends not exceeding 40 micrograms/m³) generated by a high volume of through traffic (350,000 cars/day). The City Council's project is expected to create new 21 green streets and 21 squares, 33.4 hectares of pedestrian areas and 6.6 hectares of urban green space. This will mean that one in every three streets will become a green hub, and that each resident will have one of these green hubs or squares no more than 200 meters away from their home (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2021). While aspects of urban design are seemingly aiming to create a greener city, factors such as investment, public involvement and affordability are crucial in determining the 'right to the city' for current residents. It is in this sense that the first implemented Superblock in Poblenou neighbourhood (September 2016) can help us to understand how Superblocks deal with the three core values of the New European Bauhaus:

- Quality of experience, including style/aesthetics, healthy and safe living environments;
- Sustainability, including circularity (in this case, the focus is on mobility changes due to Superblock-related urban renewal interventions); and
- Inclusion, including accessibility and affordability.

All these data can lead us to understand the impact of an already existing Superblock unit in a dense city especially in relation to COVID-19 contagious and the experience of living in a more human-centred space in comparison with the rest of the city.

Figure 1.

The localisation of the Poblenou Superblock: (a) El Parc i la Llacuna del Poblenou, (b) Provençals del Poblenou, (c) Diagonal Mar i el Front Marítim del Poblenou, (d) El Poblenou, and (e) La Vila Olímpica del Poblenou. Source: elaboration by F. Camerin (2021)



NOTE 5

<https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/superilles/en/superilla/eixample>

NOTE 6

Today the former industrial Poblenou comprise 5 neighbourhoods: El Parc i la Llacuna del Poblenou, Provençals del Poblenou, Diagonal Mar i el Front Marítim del Poblenou, El Poblenou, La Vila Olímpica del Poblenou.



The Superblock-related urban change in Poblenou unit neighbourhood

Located at the core of the former working-class district of Poblenou⁶ affected by a profit-driven urban regeneration process since the late 1980s (Camerin, 2019), the first Superblock unit was implemented between September 2016 and early 2018. It is located in El Parc i la Llacuna del Poblenou

and El Poblenou neighbourhoods and comprises 16 hectares, with 5.580 inhabitants for a total population density of 348 inhab/ha. The three specific core values of the New European Bauhaus are here reported.

First, as of the quality of experience, the implementation of Superblocks in Poblenou resulted in the pedestrianisation of 13,350 m² of public space (figure 2), thus strongly cutting vehicular traffic; the increase of trees (+212), green spaces and tree-lined streets from 9,722 m² to 18,632 m²; the provision of 349 benches; the decrease of car-parking spaces from 575 to 316; new 2,483 m² of playground and interactive games area for both elderly and young, and even a modest athletics track (figure 3); 37 new premises for activities at street level; more than 1,000 m² of cycle path, and an electric vehicle charging point.

Second, in terms of sustainable mobility, the urban renewal of the existing environment resulted in the rise by 2.6% of vehicular traffic on the four perimeter roads. However, the interior streets' vehicular traffic dramatically dropped by 58%, with an average reduction in daytime noise level of 5%. The reduction of vehicular traffic went together with the reduction of the speed limit to 10 km/h within the unit.

Third, the Superblocks impacts in terms of inclusion are quite relevant. The accessibility of this area surely improves thanks to the provision of new free-time features, being also the target of other Barcelona's residents. The affordability of the area may be at risk as the improvements in a specific urban environment may result in an increase of housing prices. Nevertheless, El Parc i la Llacuna del Poblenou and El Poblenou neighbourhoods' market values apparently follow the general real estate trend, not suffering from the Superblock's urban renewal. According to the statistic by Barcelona's City Council⁷, the price for second-hand houses for sale grew from 3,761 €/m² of 2016 to 4,657 €/m² of 2020, thus exceeding the average price of Sant Martí district (from 3,382 €/m² of 2016 to 3.541 €/m² of 2020) and the average prices of Barcelona (from 3,478 €/m² to 4,009 €/m²). Moreover, the Catalan Parliament approved in December 2020 a law regulating rent prices on new housing contracts to guarantee accessibility in sixty Catalan municipalities, including Barcelona (BOE, 2020).

Relations between Poblenou Superblock and COVID-19

The experience of living in a Superblock in an époque of Covid-19 and the evaluation of the incidence of the pandemic in a neighbourhood unit have still not been addressed neither by urban researchers not epistemologists. The overcoming of this research gap may start from comparing data between two average neighbourhoods in terms of income-per-capita index⁸ with high population density (El Parc i la Llacuna del Poblenou and El Poblenou) with two bordering and wealthier neighbourhoods, with

Figure 2.
New public spaces
in a crossroad
within the Poblenou
Superblock.
Source: photo by F.
Camerin (2018)



Figure 3.
The athletics track.
Source: photo by F.
Camerin (2018)



NOTE 7

Data found in
<https://www.bcn.cat/estadistica/angles/dades/timm/ipeus/hab2mave/index.htm>

NOTE 8

Data found in
<https://www.bcn.cat/estadistica/angles/dades/economia/renda/rdfamiliar/a2017/rfbarris.htm>

less population density (La Vila Olímpica del Poblenou and Diagonal Mar i el Front Marítim del Poblenou) (see table 1). La Vila Olímpica del Poblenou and Diagonal Mar i el Front Marítim del Poblenou were redeveloped in occasion of respectively the

1992 Summer Olympics and 2004 Universal Forum of Cultures. Instead, most of El Parc i la Llacuna del Poblenou and El Poblenou are still suffering from the decline that has affected this sector of Barcelona since the late 1970s (Camerin, 2019), waiting for their regeneration under the 22@ project to create new tertiary activities (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2017a and 2017b). These dynamics are the among the leading reasons why El Parc i la Llacuna del Poblenou and El Poblenou are the 24th and 25th neighbourhoods in the city in terms of income-per-capita index, while La Vila Olímpica del Poblenou and Diagonal Mar i el Front Marítim del Poblenou are the 7th and 8th ones.

From February 25, 2020 to June 30, 2021, El Parc i la Llacuna del Poblenou and El Poblenou recorded respectively 1,183 and 2,092 cases of COVID-19, while the neighbourhoods of La Vila Olímpica del Poblenou and Diagonal Mar i el Front Marítim del Poblenou registered just 463 and 762 cases of Covid-19 in the same period.⁹ These data may demonstrate that the impact of COVID-19 is stronger in poorer areas: the wealthy areas with less population density have been less affected by COVID-19 contagious than the poorer and more densely populated ones. The impact of just one Superblock in a pandemic situation had no relevant effect on the contagious, but how about the experience of living in a more human-centred space with the pandemic-related social restrictions?

The answer to this question relies on the online questionnaire submitted to 20 residents and 20 non-residents of Poblenou Superblock in June 2021 (Table 2).¹⁰ Both groups were asked to answer “Yes” or “No”¹¹ to the following questions:

1. Do you think that Poblenou Superblock has positively influenced the formation of identity, sense of community and emotional and social well-being?

Table 1. Data for the comparison. Elaboration by F. Camerin (2021).

Neighbourhood	Inhabitants / population density (inhab/ha)	Price for second-hand houses (2016-2020) (€/m ²)	Income-per-capita index	Cases Covid-19
El Parc i la Llacuna del Poblenou	14.861 / 136	3,761-4,657	100.4	1,183
El Poblenou	33.621 / 219	4.223-4.557	99.9	2,092
La Vila Olímpica del Poblenou	9.346 / 99	5,365-5,267	164.1	463
Diagonal Mar i el Front Marítim del Poblenou	13.455 / 110	5,891-6,237	150.1	762

Table 2. Results of the interviews. Elaboration by F. Camerin (2021).

Residents (R) / Non-resident (N-R)	1		2		3		4		5		6		7	
	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N
R	19	1	19	1	19	1	19	1	20	0	14	6	19	1
N-R	18	2	18	2	17	3	17	3	16	4	12	8	18	2

NOTE 9

Data found in https://aspb.shinyapps.io/COVID19_BCN/#Distribuci%C3%B3_dels_casos_als_barris

NOTE 10

The statistical reference sample indicated by the local group “Col·lectiu Superilla Poblenou”, <https://www.superillap9.org/slides>). The interviewees’ personal information are classified (the interviewer had no information on which stakeholder group they belong, their age, gender...) in compliance with privacy (European law on privacy, the so-called General Data Protection Regulation, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32016R0679>)

NOTE 11

Despite having submit the option “Don’t know”, all interviewees answered “Yes” or “No”.

2. Does the Superblock have a positive effect on human health?
3. Is Superblock unit able to guarantee social distancing better than a non-Superblock area of Barcelona?
4. Would you define the experience of living in a Superblock positive during the pandemic?
5. Are non-residents coming to experience the Superblock in their free-time?
6. Was the City Council able to implement the changes in accordance with the residents’ participation?
7. Would you recommend the implementation of Superblock-operated changes in the whole city?

Overall, both residents and non-residents found the implementation of Superblock appropriated to provide a more human-centred, healthier and more enjoyable environment after the 2020 pandemic outbreak than an area still not affected by Superblock-induced changes. However, the management of the urban renewal works did not satisfy all interviewees. The Poblenou neighbourhood unit was the first Superblock to be implemented, with very unsatisfactory participation of local residents. As a consequence of this lack of participation, a citizens group called “Association of People Affected by the Poblenou Superblock” (Plataforma d’Afectats per la Superilla del Poblenou) held protests and lobbied the administration to reverse the Superblock, drawing intense media attention.

Afterwards, a proper participation led by City Council sort the conflicts out and was extended to other Superblocks.¹² The City Council took advantage of the implementation of the first Superblock to design proper participation processes to avoid the risk of protests as it happened in the case of Poblenou neighbourhood. Despite these initial difficulties, residents and non-residents have increasingly understood the relevance of living in a greener and more human-centred environment with less pollution and noise. More space for the slow mobility meant also the possibility to maintain social distancing recommendations and decrease the risk of transmitting infection in urban environments. In addition, the organisational model of Superblocks gave more space for residents to their leisure time, such as sports activities and play areas for children and the elderly. The Superblock residents did not need to displace towards other sectors of Barcelona to find proper equipment to enjoy their free time. The significant drop of human activities during the lockdown along with the Superblock-related improvements made people understand the importance of extending these measures in the whole city. As a matter of fact, the Poblenou unit captured the attention of non-residents that visit this area in their free time and almost all interviewees recommend to extend Superblocks in all city.

Conclusion

This work demonstrated that Superblocks can be feasible solutions to deal with climate change, environmental and mobility issues in Barcelona according to the European guidelines of the New European Bauhaus. Superblocks are regarded as tools to help shaping healthier and more inclusive forms of living together on the basis of the renewal of the existing polluted and unhealthy urban environments. Superblocks apparently mean to be not just an environmental or economic project for a specific urban sector, but mostly a new cultural vision for designing future ways of living to extend in other European territories with proper adjustments to the local contexts. Superblocks represent also a practical solution to the post-pandemic urban planning challenges, such as reducing the car dependency and the rethink of accessibility within a specific territory in terms of work, leisure and retail habits. The application of Superblocks' principle to urban planning may also help preventing future pandemic outbreak as urban policies are the proper measures that determine the quality of urban spaces and the accessibility.

The tactical urbanism actions that gradually provide more quality spaces for the slow mobility with less disturbing factors (i.e. vehicular traffic) has helped create place attachment and a new use at the ground level. Nevertheless, the research

NOTE 12

See the citizens participation in each case of Superblock implementation, <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/superilles/es>

on Superblocks impacts on the city of Barcelona is far to be completed, also in relation to COVID-19 as this study approach needs to be extended to a broader range of cases and to address its limitations. For instance, this study has examined one case with a limited assessment, so more quantitative and qualitative work is needed in the following ways. First, the creation of an analytical matrix applied to the Superblocks already implemented in Poblenou and based on the New European Bauhaus' core values would result in a more comprehensive understanding of the Superblock-operated changes. These changes may be assessed in terms of accessibility, affordability, design, investment, resilience and sustainability for a systematic approach of these aspects through indicators. Second, a specific research that relate Covid-19 to all Superblocks may result in a truly understanding of the benefits introduced by the neighbourhood unit-operated changes in relation to contagious, physical and mental health, and social distancing in a human-centred urban environment.

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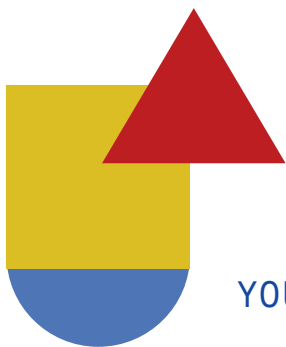
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