

Discussing Waterfronts – Barcelona

Waterfront Barcelona: balancing between tourists & local identity



What does it really take to build a booming public waterfront? According to [Project for Public Spaces](#) a successful waterfront needs **10 qualities to flourish**. Does this mean that if these former ports do indeed lack certain assets, they will not develop into booming public spaces? Or are some qualities maybe more important than others for long term sustainable waterfront development?

In a series of four blogs we will discuss the waterfronts in Barcelona, the harbour front in Rotterdam and the Waterfront in Toronto. It is clear that Barcelona over the last couple of decades has been catching up on urban, economic and social renewal. This city's harbourfront development is a great place start to investigate the key elements for succes.

Port Vell – Turning an opportunity into a long-term development

Redesigning the waterfront of Barcelona (**Port Vell** and **Barceloneta**) contributed to an explosive growth in national and international visitors. What once was an industrial area with vacant warehouses, factories, and railroad yards, cut off from the public by the B-10 highway, changed into one of the most charming waterfront areas open for public.

From 1984 until 1997 (and still developing) Mayor Pasqual Maragall addressed the opportunity of the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona and turning it into a long term development benefitting the city in the long run. Port Vell was constructed with a commercial, logistical and historical port integrating the waterfront area into the city.



By hiding the highway underground and connecting La Rambla (the main pedestrian street) to Port Vell with the bridge La Rambla del Mar, the waterfront was made easily accessible for pedestrians. The newly created lands trips were filled with beaches, parks, neighbourhoods, a shopping centre, an aquarium, an iMax theatre and a series of public spaces.

Poblenou – Urban, Economic and Social Renewal

The Poblenou neighbourhood (San Martin district), located between the Glories Square, the south-east part of Av. Diagonal, the forum-Besos and Sagrera is also part of the **strategy for the revitalization** of the Llevant (coastal) area of Barcelona. The **22@Barcelona** project –

named after the municipal society 22 ARROBA BCN, S.A.U – is the driving force behind the process of transformation of Poblenou.



Poblenou – like Port Vell and Barceloneta – has always been an industrial neighbourhood. It has a particular and complex urban construction, cut off from Barcelona due to the railways. For more than 100 years, Poblenou has been the main economic driving force of Catalonia and the ultimate industrial neighbourhood of Barcelona. By transforming the abandoned industrial areas into a space of high urban and environmental quality and with new activities linked to knowledge and innovation the [22@Barcelona project](#) wants to renew

the historical, social and economic vitality of Poblenou.



Leisure and Tourists vs Urbanisation and Knowledge

Although the Port Vell, Barceloneta and Poblenou neighbourhood share a mutual industrial background, (plans for) transformation of these areas could not be more dissimilar.

The waterfront area of Barceloneta and Port Vell has been focussing on leisure, public spaces, retail and entertainment – which has attracted millions of tourists over the years.

For the Poblenou area the City concentrates on **urbanisation, knowledge and innovation**. With the construction of the new Sagrera Intermodal Station (high speed rail) and the Barcelona International Convention Centre as cultural and administrative centres being the highlights of the neighborhood.

Despite the fact that Poblenou cannot really be seen as a waterfront area like Barceloneta and Port Vell, it is part of the plan for the refurbishment of the Llevant (coastal) area of which construction started in 1984.



Improving quality of life

The 22@Barcelona project group states that with better exploitation of this sector's urban areas, new green areas, amenities and subsidized housing can be created.

Turning housing plots into 30% public what formerly was 100% private. With the rehabilitation of the industrial structures coinciding with new social housing and new public amenities, it will be a mix of uses. And although the density will go up, it should be improving the quality of life, efficiency of infrastructures and sustainability.

In February 1999 the last stretch of Diagonal Avenue was opened. Now Poblenou was linked to Barcelona downtown by means of the business core of the city. This instigated the reconstruction of the Poblenou area. In the end resulting in over 3,029,106 m² of ground GFS (gross floor surface) for (new production) facilities, social housing and technical services.

Since 2000 an increasing number of companies have moved to the popular district. In ten years time 4,500 companies had already set up business in the district. The City of Barcelona is growing into an **attractive innovative hub** for **startups** and international companies. And the city is **actively helping** companies on their way. So you can safely state that Poblenou is booming and accessible to all layers of society.

An important asset seems to be the way Poblenou is also **showcasing its local historical identity** by using iconic factory

buildings, which serve a variety of functions but also creating a new local identity by combining modern architecture (designed by local architects) with the old.

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L'EDICIÓ D'ABRIL DEL PALO ALTO MARKET ES CELEBRARÀ EL 4 I 5
L'Edició d'abril del Palo Alto Market es celebrarà el 4 i 5 Palo Alto és un nou mercat per a Barcelona, del carrer i

A playground for tourists and the rich?

Port Vell Harbour and the Barceloneta waterfront seem to be struggling with the image of increasingly turning into a playground for the well-off focussing on rich tourists and leisure. In 2010 the British **Salamanca Investment Group** took over the **Marina Port Vell**. Last February their plan for an extensive harbour for luxury yachts was completed after four years.

The focus on upmarket leisure, tourism, culture, and urban-oriented business activities has proven a **profitable development strategy**, as many of the approximately 2 million annual cruise passengers pass through Port Vell shortly after they disembark. This fact increases land-values, and the state owned port authority has gained experience in extracting this value through the development of its property.

Though Port Vell was considered an economic and financial success, its social contribution to surrounding areas and the city as a whole has been publicly criticized. Locals of the Barceloneta neighbourhood – an area which traditionally was a fishermen's and industrial

neighbourhood – had been against plans for this multi-millionaire harbour. They were afraid it would lose its local identity, turning it into an area only accessible for multi-millionaires. Worried **it will create the downfall** of one of the few city centre barrios which have maintained its traditional working-class character.

Local character, identity and accessibility key to succes

Although not every element on the list of PPS is represented in both neighbourhoods separately, together they seem to work.

Qualities for a flourishing Waterfront - PPS.org	Port Vell/ Barceloneta (waterfront)	Poblenou (coastal area)
1. Surrounding Buildings Enhance Public Space	●	●
2. Limits are placed on Residential Development	●	
3. Activities go on Round-the-Clock and Throughout the Year		
4. Flexible Design Fosters Adaptability		●
5. Creative Amenities Boost everyone's Enjoyment	●	●
6. Access Made Easy by Boat, Bike and Foot	●	●
7. Local Identity is Showcased		●
8. The Water Itself Draws Attention	●	
9. Iconic Buildings Serve a Variety of Functions		●
10. Good Management Maintains Community Vision		●

The scenic view of the Barcelona harbour and beaches draw the visitors' attention. **Connecting the city to the sea** with its leisure boulevards accessible for anyone who travels by foot, bike, car or boat. This connection is the very reason why limits are placed on further residential development, not wanting to close off the only decades ago opened up waterfront, making it merely accessible to residents in their luxury waterfront condos.

With the Poblenou area focussing on knowledge sharing activities, **encouraging innovation**, and showcasing its history, both areas together form a perfect mix of leisure and entrepreneurship.

From the success in Barcelona we learn that although opportunities are given to revitalize an area, focus on a shared long term community vision is what is important. And in this vision local character, identity and accessibility seem to be the key elements.

These elements are necessary in creating long term engagement with the local community. Although scalability through tourism will make a place flourish economically, at the same time a city does not want to be alienating or disconnecting it from local inhabitants. Eventually making a place less resilient in the long term.

So what is our Barcelona lesson?