

Interview

Housing in Barcelona: New Agents for New Policies

Josep Maria Montaner (JMM) interviewed by David H. Falagán (DHF)

Josep Maria Montaner has spent an important part of his professional career in academia, surrounded by books and students, but also travelling and understanding the realities and contexts of other worlds.¹ This urge for knowledge soon became a vocation to share it – he authored more than fifty books on the theory and history of architecture – and a drive to participate actively in the urban transformation of Barcelona, his city. In 2015 that vocation led to his political venture as housing councillor in Barcelona and deputy councillor in the district of Sant Martí. Since then he has been part of the cabinet headed by mayor Ada Colau.

Among other things, in the academic world Montaner is considered an expert in housing. Between 2005 and 2015 he co-directed the Master's programme *Laboratorio de la Vivienda Sostenible del Siglo XXI* (Laboratory for Sustainable Housing of the Twenty-First Century) with professor Zaida Muxí in the Polytechnic University of Catalonia. Both directors curated the exhibition *Habitar el presente. Vivienda en España: sociedad, ciudad, tecnología y recursos* (Inhabiting the present. Housing in Spain: society, city, technology and resources), a historical portrait of the Spanish housing situation before the economic crisis.² More recently, he has published *La arquitectura de la vivienda colectiva* (The architecture of collective housing), one of the most complete texts about the evolution of collective housing over the last hundred years.³

We met him in Barcelona in October 2018 to find out more about his perspective on habitat and current housing policy.

From academia to municipal management

DHF: After almost forty years dedicated to education, being considered a professor with indisputable academic prestige, you decided to shift to municipal politics. What reasons led you to make this decision?

JMM: The main reason was the unique opportunity to devote myself to the city of Barcelona, an object of study and experience through decades, to which I have dedicated courses and books, and about which I directed a research group analysing the Barcelona model. It was also an opportunity to enter into politics and get to know the reality from an active position that I had defended in books such as *Arquitectura y Política* (Architecture and Politics) (2011), written with Zaida Muxí, and *Del diagrama a las experiencias, hacia una arquitectura de la acción* (From diagrams to experiences, towards an architecture of action) (2014).⁴

From the beginning, we took part in the groups that have worked since 2014 to prepare the candidature of Ada Colau and 'Barcelona en Comú'.⁵ Even though I never expected to get involved in politics, the need for an architect in Colau's list created the opportunity. The most important aspect of this experience has been to be part of a magnificent group managing the city.

DHF: From this new perspective, what do you think are the crucial challenges regarding housing in the next years?

JMM: Housing in Barcelona, as in all of Catalonia and Spain, faces the challenge of catching up in relation to Europe regarding the continuous development of public housing policies. For the Spanish authorities, housing has always been understood as a means for obtaining economic results rather than a basic human right. Here, I should clarify that indeed public housing neighbourhoods were built over the last century, but following the housing policies established by different Spanish and Catalan governments, it was possible to convert them to private ownership after twenty or twenty-five years. For example, it is estimated that in the whole Catalonia almost two hundred thousand public houses were built during the last eight decades, all of which eventually entered the private housing market. When we started our term in the Municipality of Barcelona, in June 2015, there were fewer than seven thousand public rental houses owned by the municipality. However, if we added all the houses built over many decades by public housing agencies such as the *Obra Sindical del Hogar*, the *Ministerio de Vivienda*, *ADIGSA* and the *Patronat Municipal de la Vivienda*, we would have thirty thousand houses. Therefore, the main challenge for the current municipal cabinet is to advance a resilient and highly diversified housing policy for the next decade. This challenge is defined in our Plan for the Right to Housing in Barcelona (*Plan del Derecho a la Vivienda en Barcelona, 2016–2025*), which aims at reserving eighty percent of the new residential developments for affordable rental and social housing.

DHF: Considering your academic background, what are your sources (both intellectual and professional) of good practices in housing architecture?⁶

JMM: There are a lot of intellectual and professional models, as well as political, that serve as our sources. They start from the social democratic housing policies in Europe in the interwar period, especially in cities like Vienna, and in countries like the Netherlands and Germany. Another important source is the housing policies implemented in the 1930s in the United States, after the 1929 crisis, following Catherine Bauer's studies, issuing laws and developing plans to support the right to housing. Latin America also stood out during the 1960's and 70's, with good housing policies that had more or less continuity. In Allende's Chile, in the 1970's in Mexico, and in the stable housing policies in Uruguay, especially in the cooperative housing sector, social housing has continued to develop without interruption according to policies established fifty years ago.

DHF: Aside from past examples, can you name a few contemporary cases that are worth mentioning?

JMM: We are talking about times of neoliberalism, and the search for solutions to get out of the housing crises that have afflicted countries and cities since the turn of the century (in the Netherlands, Finland and Japan since the 1990's), finishing in the last and disastrous stages: the mortgage crisis in 2007 and the disruption of housing finance, which has led to an abusive increase in rent values in the most representative cities of the planet. Therefore, today it is hard to find good examples. Instead, we can study how different cities and countries are dealing with this crisis. In this regard, Barcelona is an exemplar, despite its delay, thanks to all the diverse resources and tools that the city has formulated to meet the crisis and shift the paradigm. To achieve this, it helps that Barcelona has a very strong tradition of affordable housing for the elderly, and today, a new tradition of cooperative housing is being consolidated. In the international scene, there are still good examples in the Nordic countries and in

England, nowadays implemented essentially by housing associations, which are compensating for the absence of the public sector after the neoliberal turn. Before the crisis, Brazil provided one of the best examples with the 'Favela-Bairro' programme developed in the 1990s in Rio de Janeiro, and with the policies for the redevelopment of the favelas of São Paulo, implemented around 2010.

State of the art

DHF: The team to which you belong, directed by mayor Ada Colau, started their mandate in a very challenging moment regarding access to housing. The mayor herself was a prominent activist in favour of the right to housing – she is one of the founders of the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (platform for the victims of mortgages). What was the situation you encountered when you started as Barcelona's Councillor for Housing?

JMM: Both the situation we inherited and the evolution that took place from then could be defined as a condition of housing emergency, complicating even further the possibility of a wide and diversified housing plan, since the most urgent matters demand a great effort. To address this, we created new support units to help families and cohabitation groups affected by eviction processes.⁷ Moreover, we started implementing Catalonia's 2007 Law for the Right to Housing.⁸ Most of its articles had remained merely 'on paper' since 2007, and we finally started to apply them. Barcelona was thus ahead of other Catalan cities in the introduction of several measures in the housing sector. A new jurisprudence was created, going beyond the discipline of urbanism, defending the right to housing and fighting against sub-standard housing. To achieve this, the regulation of construction permits (*Ordenanza de permisos de obras*, ORPIMO) was revised to protect tenants whose houses go through renovation processes; municipal norms against real estate harassment were added, and the housing

offices were strengthened with new staff and lawyers specialised in the laws protecting housing rights.

DHF: To what extent do you think this scenario can be extrapolated to other contexts? Which of the critical factors can be considered global?

JMM: Beyond the specific and circumstantial factors in each city – in Barcelona, the pressure created by tourism and the arrival of specialised technicians and students in a context of scarcity of affordable housing – the problem of housing exists all over the planet and has very different manifestations. These are marked by the dominating tendency to encourage the purchase of housing units, the lack of governmental involvement and investment, leaving big sectors of society unattended and pushing them to desperate actions, such as squatting or self-building in the periphery.

DHF: With your experience as Barcelona's Councillor for Housing, how do you evaluate the situation of Catalonia and Spain concerning housing policies?

JMM: In Spain, there are no continuous public housing policies. The situation has even been aggravated by many processes converting public housing into owner-occupied homes. Since the beginning of the democratic period [the last half of the 1970s], policy has largely depended on the policies and capacities of the governments of Spain's autonomous provinces. In fact, the government of the Basque Country is an example, with a continuous and strong housing policy over forty years that has turned places like Vitoria into cities with almost no housing problems. Also, the government of Andalucía developed a very good housing policy in the 1990's, building many popular, contemporary neighbourhoods and promoting self-help construction policies. In those years, there were

also many good initiatives of housing competitions for young architects. In the beginning of the democratic period, the Autonomous Community of Valencia also promoted public housing. In the case of Catalonia, the government only developed an authentic housing policy during the seven years of the tripartite government (2003–2010), in which a basic legal document was written: the Catalan Law for the Right to Housing, published in 2007.⁹ These conditions set the backgrounds against which each city and autonomous community faces the housing problem today, in a general scenario where the aid for public housing has been gradually reduced to the minimum: in 2017 it represented 0,06 percent of the Spanish GDP, when the average of many European countries is above one percent.

DHF: To what extent do you think that neoliberal politics have influenced the current situation of housing?

JMM: The monetisation of housing, in the last decades, triggered the appreciation of housing as a commodity for investment and profitability (often, also speculation) instead of a right and a responsibility of governmental authorities. In order to deal with this big problem of the accelerated commodification of housing in the neoliberal context, it is crucial to provide public housing policies and a rental housing stock that have been lacking in Spain. The countries that had this provision (percentages of public housing above twenty-five percent of the entire housing stock) have been able to face this crisis with more resources and tools.

Objectives and strategies of Barcelona's governmental housing plan

DHF: Together with your team at the municipality, you have developed an ambitious Plan for the Right to Housing, that includes exceptional measures. What, in your opinion, are the fundamental features in the housing policies projected in the plan?

JMM: Naturally, introducing a paradigm shift in Barcelona's housing policies could only have happened from the basis of the new Plan for the Right to Housing 2016–2025 (*Plan por el Derecho a la Vivienda de Barcelona 2016–2025*, in Spanish), designed with a participative process in the neighbourhoods.¹⁰ It involved twenty-one sessions (in order to develop a plan that is not only for the city but also adapted to the characteristics of each district). It was discussed with the main actors of the real estate sector and negotiated with the political parties in power in order to achieve the maximum possible consensus. This consensus was widely achieved (thirty votes in favour, out of forty-one). The Plan for the Right to Housing 2016–2025 is centred in four essential vectors of great influence: the fight against situations of housing emergency, the definition of all possible resources and tools to achieve a good use of the current housing stock, such as the empty flats census, the aid provided to owners to renovate their houses and incorporate them in the affordable housing stock. Further, the plan includes a series of measures for a new housing approach that combats sub-standard housing, the withholding of houses that are empty for more than two years, or real estate harassment. The plan is producing a major shift in the production systems of new housing, currently developing seventy-two different projects and fulfilling current society goals, such as achieving energetic efficiency, promoting healthy environments, flexibility and gender equality, and a complete re-thinking of the renovation policies. These are based on the diversification of mechanisms and scales (calls for community engagement and participation, fair distribution of aid and support among the neighbourhoods) and on the introduction of new actions such as the renovation of interiors, proactive technical intervention in areas of high complexity and the introduction of urban renewal approaches that include anti-gentrification measures.

DHF: Is there a concrete strategic plan for the progressive application of these objectives?

JMM: In short, the plan is based on a total diversification of lines of action and processes, without giving away any of the possibilities, opening lines of collaboration with the third sector, cooperatives, foundations, non-profit and limited-profit organisations and companies. The plan is aware that there is not a unique, magical or instant solution to solve the housing problem within the capitalist mode of production and the private ownership of land. Therefore, the problem is perceived as insoluble in a definitive way, but needing to be continuously tackled.

DHF: Which of these implemented measures or launched mechanisms, in your view, sums up the impact that this change of attitude may have?

JMM: We consider that this change of attitude is noticeable in each of the four vectors we are working on. Regarding the housing emergency, we have created a set of conditions in which, despite the continuation of evictions and rent increases, the community is aware that they are not alone in finding solutions to their problems. In relation to the good use of housing, we finally have a census of empty flats and we have demonstrated that the municipality of Barcelona is relentless regarding any kind of abuse in relation to the right to housing: housing discipline, fines on illegal tourist apartments, penalties to banks and financial entities that do not observe the law or that keep empty flats, or that do not take responsibility for occupied flats under their ownership used illegally. Regarding new construction, we have boosted new forms, such as *Covivienda* (Co-housing) and cooperative housing. We have also started new forms of public-private partnership such as the *Operador Metropolitano de Vivienda* (Metropolitan Operator for Housing), the first organisation in Spain similar to the housing associations model popular in northern Europe.

Regarding renovation, we have shifted the model, from an administration that provides bureaucratic support to a proactive initiative that takes action in the houses that have proven to need it.

DHF: Which agents or tools that were invisible before have been incorporated in the measures that you are applying?

JMM: Apart from the ones mentioned above, such as the creation of the UCER (*Unidad Contra la Exclusión Residencial*, Unit Against Housing Exclusion) or the initiatives towards a more controlled housing sector, we can highlight two different kinds of measures. On the one hand, those related to the shift in urban planning approaches to protect the right to housing, such as the Modification to the General Metropolitan Plan (*Modificación del Plan General Metropolitano*, MPMG) to reserve a thirty percent quota of affordable housing in all the projects (constructions above six hundred square metres) in a consolidated urban fabric, whether they are new construction or rehabilitation projects. Furthermore the “right of first refusal” for the City Council over all purchases of housing buildings and land for housing has been extended to the whole city. On the other hand, we can find measures related to industrialisation and housing production, to rapidly increase the public housing stock through calls for projects such as *Proyecto y Obra* (Project and Construction). Moreover, the creation of the APROP (*Alojamientos de Proximidad Provisionales*, Temporary Neighbouring Housing) was essential. These are quickly built temporary, modular and prefabricated houses to be located in areas of high real estate pressure, and the strategy is to strengthen the small community life. [Fig. 1, 2]

Learning

DHF: Considering your experience, do you think that a new theory about housing and its future challenges is necessary?

JMM: A new theory about housing is always necessary. We have to look back to learn from previous experiences but also from contemporary initiatives. It is very important to adjust and synthesise all the aspects and areas that come together in the field of housing but, usually, are handled individually: architectural and urban quality, bio-construction and health, social aspects, management and financing mechanisms, and so on. Since housing is a global issue to which each country and city adopts different positions, it an alliance between cities is vital, in order to share experiences and tools. This alliance should have the intention of insisting that more competences be allocated to cities, aiming to defend society's ceaseless and direct demand for the right to housing.

DHF: What role can urban planning and architecture play as innovative tools to contribute to a global development of the right to housing?

JMM: The role that urban planning plays is essential as a tool to anticipate and innovate. Therefore, it is important, first, to have updated data and information (this is why we have promoted the creation of the Housing Metropolitan Observatory for Barcelona) and, in consequence, design policies and urban plans that provide an answer to the problems diagnosed. In this sense, in the case of Barcelona it is vital to understand the housing problem within a metropolitan context. Unambiguous information, planning and housing policies in tune with reality are the bases to anticipate, as much as possible, future trends.

DHF: Do you think there a need for a re-orientation of the approach towards housing in architectural education?

JMM: Undoubtedly. In architectural education, the vision of great feats (and therefore, large, star projects) and the great male heroes is still dominant. However, architecture is a collective work related to

social context in which housing is an essential part of the urban fabric. Therefore, introducing social, ecological and feminist visions is crucial, and, within this vision, it is very important to give a substantial role to housing and teach students to be inspired by reality, come closer to users and be sensitive towards participation processes. As a result, the values we should transmit are equality and justice, flexibility and perfectibility, and rehabilitation and health.

DHF: Does architecture, as a discipline, have options to approach the actual problems of housing in a sharper way?

JMM: It does, and it has also had options in the past. If it does not reinvent itself to face the challenges, take advantage of the opportunities and make space for the young generation, for innovations and new ideas, it will become obsolete. It will continue to be an instrument for power and speculation, with models only available to the unreachable stars of architecture. Definitely, there are many hints that indicate that it will not be like this, and a new collective architecture, a new urbanism of the commons and new social and collaborative approaches are already happening. In many cases, these new ideas are embryonic developments, sometimes only pilots of good practices, which are gradually becoming more visible.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Fig. 1: APROP project in Ciutat Vella, Barcelona; general view. Source: Straddle3 Constructors.

Fig. 2: La Borda Housing Cooperative. Cohousing project in Barcelona; interior view. Source: LaCol Cooperativa d'Arquitectes.

Notes

1. The original transcript, in Spanish, was translated into English by Gonzalo Zylberman.
2. Josep Maria Montaner and Zaida Muxí, *Habitar el presente. Vivienda en España: sociedad, ciudad, tecnología y recursos* (Madrid: Ministerio de Vivienda, 2006).
3. Josep Maria Montaner, *La arquitectura de la vivienda colectiva: Políticas y proyectos en la ciudad contemporánea*, Estudios Universitarios de Arquitectura 26 (Barcelona: Editorial Reverté, 2015).
4. Josep Maria Montaner and Zaida Muxí, *Arquitectura y Política: Ensayos para mundos alternativos* (Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, 2011); Josep Maria Montaner, *Del diagrama a las experiencias, hacia una arquitectura de la acción* (Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, 2014).
5. Ada Colau was one of the founding members and a spokesperson of the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (platform for the victims of mortgages), created in 2009. In June 2014, she founded *Barcelona en Comú* (Barcelona in common), a citizen's platform currently governing the city of Barcelona, after the May 2015 municipal elections.
6. David H. Falagán (ed.) *Innovation in Affordable Housing. Barcelona 2015-2018* (Barcelona: Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2019).
7. These units were SIPHO (*Servei d'Intervenció en la Pèrdua d'Habitatge i Ocupació*, Intervention Service in the Loss of Housing and Employment), and UCER (*Unidad Contra la Exclusión Residencial*, Unit Against Housing Exclusion).
8. Law 18/2007 (28 December 2007).
9. Catalonia's tripartite governments (2003–2010) were formed by the PSC (Catalonia's Socialist Party), the eco-socialists of the ICV and the secessionist republicans of the ERC.
10. For an overview of the plan's goals, see: <https://youtu.be>, accessed 7 January 2019 and 'Barcelona Right to Housing Plan 2016–2025', *Qüestions d'Habitatge* 21 (Barcelona: Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2018).

Biographies

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