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Urban Governance in Post-pandemic Barcelona: A Superblock-Based New Normal?

Federico Camerin 

Email : federico.camerin@uva.es

Affiliationids : Aff1 Aff2, Correspondingaffiliationid : Aff1

Aff1 [Universidad de Valladolid, Valladolid, Spain, Plaza del Colegio de Santa Cruz 8, 47002](#)

Aff2 [Departamento de Urbanística y Ordenación Territorial - Grupo de Investigación en Arquitectura, Urbanismo y Sostenibilidad \(GIAU+S\), Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid, Avenida de Juan de Herrera, 4, 28040, Madrid, Spain](#)

Abstract

The COVID-19 crisis created a drastic confrontation with our built environments and the city-making process. In Barcelona, the implementation of Superblocks' concept—including several measures to create healthier, more inclusive, and resilient environments—started in the pre-pandemic period (2016–2019) with difficulties of implementation in urban planning and governance. Barcelona's urban everyday life has changed during the pandemic toward a more human-centered approach, so Superblocks-related solutions have gained support and attention. The City Council consequently in mid-2021 launched the "Barcelona Superblocks Government Measure" to apply the basic principles of this concept to planning processes and decision-making. Since then, urban planning policies have been implemented with fundamental urban changes induced by the pandemic and developed new urban regeneration strategies that prioritize public health in urban design. This chapter analyzes Superblocks-related measures and highlights the critical lessons learned from this experience for urban planning and governance in post-COVID-19 Barcelona. The main argument is that Barcelona's Superblocks are tied to human-centered pre-pandemic policies launched in the last decade. The disruption caused by COVID-19 has enabled the new normal by changes in urban planning and governance leading to more sustainable accessibility and connectivity through urban democracy, creating a new sense of community.

Keywords

Urban policies
Post-COVID-19
Resilience
Governance
New normal

22.1. Introduction

The goal of this research is to highlight the critical lessons learned from Superblocks-related measures in post-COVID-19 Barcelona and provide insights into the new normal. In particular, this analysis aims to fill the gap of knowledge on the impacts of COVID-19 in terms of innovative solutions for urban planning and governance that may provide feasible strategies for environmental, social, and urban justice.

Until now, no public reports or scientific research have dealt with the aforementioned aspects in Barcelona. The attempt is to partially overcome this lack of knowledge by highlighting the factors that have sped up the implementation of Superblocks in Barcelona since 2020. This work demonstrates that Barcelona's Superblocks enable the new normal by relevant changes in urban planning and governance leading to more sustainable accessibility and connectivity through urban democracy and creating a new sense of community. This work argues that COVID-19 has been an accelerator of a tendency that was already taken place in Barcelona and has sped up the implementation of Superblocks. A more human-centered city is now the cornerstone in the 2021 strategic document on government measures called "Barcelona Superblocks Government Measure" (Ajuntament de Barcelona [2021c](#)). This document aims to extend the Superblocks' basic principles to planning processes and decision-making to the whole city, being a clear manifestation of a striking change toward a more human-centered planning.

The research on Superblocks-related measures deals with relevant challenges, as the document Barcelona Superblocks Government Measure was only released in late 2021, and the implementation is at its beginning, so this urban planning and governance document does not provide a robust theoretical framework. However, Barcelona is claimed to be particularly advanced on its journey away from traditional urban planning and government schemes, consequently Superblocks' principles may be applied in other cities on the basis of local peculiarities. The exploration of the Superblocks-related approach may reveal much about the challenges and opportunities that the post-pandemic new normal may expect in terms of innovative human-centered and healthy solutions, aiming to deal with the existential crisis facing traditional city-making processes around the world. This work argues that the transformation and revision of priorities and substantive goals of urban planning and governance have been on the political agenda of Barcelona in the pre-pandemic period. Nevertheless, the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak showed that climate, economic, and social crises can accelerate the spread of the virus, so Barcelona's City Council has seriously taken into account this urgent need and sped up measures related to the ecological transition such as Superblocks.

22.2. Theory and Method

This study is qualitative observational research that explores the features describing the implementation of Barcelona's Superblock and relies on two main methods. First, the document analysis of gray literature (mostly government's legislative documents, and urban planning and governance sources). Second, specific fieldwork in this Spanish city in October 2021 and April 2022 that comprised the following activities: archival research at the *Arxiu Central d'Ecologia Urbana*; on-site visits in Poblenou and Sant Antoni neighborhoods where Superblocks are already implemented; and the participation as a listener to the international event "Barcelona Superilla. The AfterCovid City" (5th–7th October 2021) (Barcelona City Council and Placemaking Europe [2021](#)). These methods helped to explore how Superblocks-related solutions have gained support and attention in the planning and governance discourse of Barcelona, resulting in the Barcelona Superblocks Government Measure, an innovative document comprising urban planning and governance strategies for a new normal.

22.2.1. Post-COVID-19 City: Struggles and Impacts

As well as in past epidemic diseases, the current COVID-19 crisis has created a drastic confrontation with our built environments and the city-making process in such way that it has contributed to reshape the daily life of cities (Megaheda and Ghonem [2020](#); Santa et al. [2021](#)). Growing epidemiologic studies on the contagious rates of COVID-19 have demonstrated that specific urban conditions such as environmental, socio-economic, and territorial inequalities are relevant to the spread of the virus. Urban sectors with a high level of air pollution and drastic meteorological conditions present a higher risk of COVID-19 mortality (Urrutia-Pereira et al. [2020](#); Madl et al. [2021](#)). The pandemic is also likely to hit hardest the poor, vulnerable, and less green neighborhoods areas and to aggravate urban problems such as socio-spatial segregation (Baena-Díez et al. [2020](#); Spotswood et al. [2021](#)). From the economic perspective, cities with less diversified economic bases have been hit especially hard, especially those shaped for decades by mass tourism (United Nations [2020](#): 2). Although cities may be regarded as centers of infections due to overcrowded conditions (Santiago-Alarcon and MacGregor-Fors [2020](#)), current scholarship is showing no evidence that population density is linked with COVID-19 cases and deaths (Carozzi et al. [2020](#); Hamidi et al. [2020](#)). Cities, therefore, must be at the center of new transdisciplinary approaches because half of the world's population live in urban areas that often place unsustainable demands on natural resources and present serious environmental degradation that threatens people's health and quality of life. This is why urban planning, a discipline born in the mid-nineteenth century to address the dirtiness of urban environments (Cerdà [1867](#)), is put at stake to provide resilient and sustainable solutions to reduce the pandemic impacts.

New governance perspectives and strategies are also claimed to play a fundamental role in addressing issues of health, climate, and ecological crisis and provide feasible solutions for healthier and equitable cities. As stressed by the report "Policy Responses to Coronavirus" by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, the crisis has accelerated municipal efforts to tackle these issues through existing urban policies and/or launched new innovative ones spanning a large range of topics—i.e., climate change, citizen participation, and housing—that have addressed the multifaceted "new normal" of post-pandemic cities (OECD [2020](#)). The UN-Habitat report entitled "Cities and pandemics: toward a more just, green and healthy future" shows the pathways, according to which cities may decrease the pandemic impacts by more equitable, healthy, and environmentally friendly solutions (UN-Habitat [2021](#)). As stated by Fabris et al. ([2020](#)), the 15-min city, Tactical urbanism, and Superblocks are solutions that are growingly applied internationally. All of them were introduced in the pre-pandemic period to provide a more holistic approach to the city-making process, enabling the "right to the city" not just for the wealthy, but for everyone (Lefebvre [1968](#)).

In this context, Barcelona is claimed to be an avant-garde city in the field of urban planning and governance because it has promoted innovative tools in the last decades (Degen and García [2012](#); March and Ribera-Fumaz [2016](#)). The Spanish city has sped up the

Superblocks implementation for developing measures to create healthier, more inclusive, and resilient environments.

22.2.2. Barcelona's Superblocks: Origins, Issues, and Research Gaps

Superblocks are specific examples of the so-called "neighborhood units" that bring together a number of urban blocks that utterly cut the amount of public space dedicated to private cars in favor of cycling, walking, public transport, and leisure. This change in urban design is also accompanied by the provision of human-centered facilities at the street level in combination with green solutions that equip healthier open spaces to reduce air pollution, noise, and heat island effects that also increase green spaces and physical activity (Nieuwenhuijsen 2021). Historically, the concept of neighborhood unit appeared in the early twentieth century as a diagrammatic planning model for residential development in metropolitan areas that attempt to shape functional, self-contained, and desirable neighborhoods in industrializing cities to revert squalid urban living conditions (Perry 1929; Mumford 1954; Johnson, 2002). This concept was taken into account by the Catalan architect Oriol Bohigas in the late 1950s (Bohigas 1958: 474–475) to rearrange the speculative urbanization patterns of Barcelona's Extension (Aibar and Bijker 1997), but its concrete application occurred only 50 years later in the frame of Salvador Rueda-fostered "Ecological Urbanism" (Rueda et al. 2014). On the basis of a decisive awareness of the emergency to solve environmental and social issues that impede healthy and socio-territorial balanced living conditions (Mueller et al. 2017; Blanco and Nel-lo 2018; Pereira Barboza et. al. 2021), Rueda (2019) envisioned 503 neighborhood units that would cover the entire surface of Barcelona by 2030. This system is expected to reverse the private-car dependency through a reorganization of public spaces and prevent 667 premature deaths annually by these main measures: The reduction of 19.2% of private motorized transport would improve air quality and reduce urban noise levels, and the increase of green areas from 2.7 to 6.3 m²/inhab in the urban center would drop the heat island effect by about –35.8% (Mueller et al. 2020).

Notwithstanding the increasing interest to study the different characteristics of Superblocks and their impacts on the urban environment (Scudellari et al. 2020; Zografos et al. 2020; Frago and Graziano 2021; Benini et al. 2021; Torner 2021; Eggimann 2022; Nello-Deakin 2022; Rodriguez-Rey et al. 2022), current research still lacks to understand how Superblocks have resulted in a deep change in urban planning and governance strategies.

22.3. Results

This section is dedicated to the results of the inquiry on the relationship between the implementation of Superblocks system and the evolution of urban planning and governance strategies promoted by Barcelona's City Council in the last 10 years (2012–2022). The document "Public Commitment toward Sustainability 2012–2022—Compromís 22" (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2012) identifies 10 objectives for a more equitable, prosperous, and self-sufficient Barcelona through the involvement, commitment, and collaboration of the entities signing the public commitment. One of these goals was to establish Superblocks and consequently enhance human-centered neighborhoods where people can live and work, reducing distances from home to work, reorganizing the roads hierarchically, and creating new urban attractors that generate centrality in the neighborhoods (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2014: 13).

In a context of growing awareness to promote resilient and sustainable solutions on the basis of green solutions (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2013), the application of Superblocks model relied on the basic idea that urban planning should shift from private-vehicle-centered mobility to the slow mobility (von Schönfeld and Bertolini 2017). Barcelona was about to implement many actions called for in city streets to fulfill other key urban functions according to the 2013–2018 and 2019–2024 Urban Mobility Plans (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2014). Superblocks were among these main actions. The Urban Mobility Plan stated that the organization of Barcelona's urban fabric will be shaped according to Superblocks (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2012: 5, 74). On the basis of the local government document "Let us fill the streets with life" (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2016a), Superblocks implementation began with two pilot projects in Poblenou and Sant Antoni neighborhoods in the pre-pandemic period (2016–2019) (Figs. 22.1 and 22.2).

Fig. 22.1

Superblocks-intended street in Poblenou neighborhood. *Photo* Camerin (2022)



Fig. 22.2

Superblocks interventions in a crossroad in Sant Antoni neighborhood. *Photo Camerin (2022)*



On the one hand, the mobility week of September 2016 enabled the implementation of a tactical urbanism approach in a 3×3 block area of Poble Nou defined by Badajoz–Tànger–Llacuna–Pallars streets. The local agency BCNEcologia and Barcelona's architecture schools installed street furniture according to a cul-de-sac scheme: This provisional intervention, instead of lasting a couple of weeks, was eventually left in place without consulting local citizens. This top-down decision generated opposition from the residents, but the neighborhood unit was eventually totally implemented after more than a year of talks with citizens (Ajuntament de Barcelona [2018](#)). On the other hand, the 2017 participatory process for Sant Antoni neighborhood redevelopment (Eixample district) resulted in an action plan for the creation of a green axis structure, which intersections generate squares for refurbishment in the surroundings of the local market (Ajuntament de Barcelona [2022](#)). The success of these two operations strongly depended on a participatory process that involved Poble Nou's and Sant Antoni's citizens and stakeholders, even though the case of Poble Nou relied on ex-post participation.

The year 2020 represented a turning point for Barcelona. On 15th January 2020, the City Council declared the climate emergency (Ajuntament de Barcelona [2020a](#))—followed by the Climate Emergency Action Plan (Ajuntament de Barcelona [2021a](#))—and urged to change the urban model of the metropolis to properly tackle environmental, social, and urban justice. To achieve these goals, stepping

up the pace of Superblocks to transform 15 km of streets into green axes by 2024 and creating at least 10 comprehensive-care Superblocks by 2025 was considered essential (Ajuntament de Barcelona [2020a](#): 13).

The pandemic outbreak utterly changed Barcelona's urban everyday life, posing new questions on the shape of the city toward a more local and human-centered approach (Ajuntament de Barcelona [2020b](#)). The benefits related to the implementation of Superblocks were also highlighted by specific studies. Camerin and Fabris ([2021](#)) found that the first two neighborhood units had helped to mitigate health and socio-economic inequities, reduced pollutants, and encouraged trade and citizen interaction. Moreover, the Barcelona Public Health Agency (Agència de Salut Pública de Barcelona [2021](#)) identified the positive environmental and health effects of Superblocks-related urban transformations. These improvements went so far that Superblocks-related solutions have growingly gained support and attention to the extent that they were included in the local strategic recovery plan of October 2020 to create a collective consensus with city stakeholders (Ajuntament de Barcelona [2020c](#)). In late 2020, the City Council launched a competition to extend Superblocks measures from Sant Antoni to the whole Eixample district (Ajuntament de Barcelona [2020d](#), [2021d](#)). The idea was to develop a healthier and more equitable urban environment in the area with the most intense daily vehicle traffic flow in Barcelona (350,000 cars/day) and high levels of pollution ($50 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ on average in 2019, $10 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ more than the WHO recommended $40 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$) (Ajuntament de Barcelona [2021b](#): 8). The City Council envisaged turning 21 streets into green hubs and generating 21 new squares at the crossroads, devoting 33.4 hectares to pedestrians and 6.6 hectares to urban green space (Ajuntament de Barcelona [2021b](#): 9).

While going through the implementation phases of these great Superblocks, the City Council launched in October 2021 the "Barcelona Superblocks Government Measure" to apply the basic principles of Superblocks concept to planning processes and decision-making in the new normal. The document relies on a City Council-financed public investment of 525 million euros with two expected main outputs: the conversion of 1,000,000 m² from private motorized transport to human-centered activities and the creation of 8311 new jobs (Ajuntament de Barcelona [2021c](#)). These objectives will be achieved through a wide range of actions aiming at radically changing the framework for decision-making on the shape of the urban environment. Barcelona's urban planning and governance now put first a human-friendly and proximity-centered approach to daily life, targeting economic, environmental, and social justice. In particular, the approach of Superblocks for the new normal in Barcelona's urban planning and governance will be applied to five axes. First, the transformation of public space for slow mobility and providing new green spaces to increase socialization. Second, people-friendly improvement of neighborhoods and venues on the ground of accessibility and proximity. Third, the reactivation of the economic fabric on an ecological and sustainable basis. Fourth, the promotion of sustainable mobility that allows people to move on foot safely, quickly, and comfortably, all of which is in accordance with the extension and improvement of the city's public bike-sharing service. In addition, the increase of the current public housing stock on the basis of the 2016–2025 "Right to Housing Plan" aims to build 6100 public housing units and the purchase of around 1000 flats for public housing between 2016 and 2021 (Ajuntament de Barcelona [2016b](#)).

22.4. Discussion

In a context of growing awareness about the urgent need to change the way to plan the city of the future, the COVID-19 crisis has jeopardized the fundamental attributes that define urban life: diversity, density, social proximity, and human exchange.

A wide and open debate investigating the ways to make our cities more inclusive, empowering, healthy, equitable, and sustainable seems to converge on the fact that the corona pandemic is not a unique event but rather a symptomatic incident, a disruption that most likely will re-occur in similar ways in future (Ibert et al. [2022](#)). In this sense, the COVID-19 has offered an opportunity to realistically stress-test the robustness of the influential conceptual ideas that may adapt urban governance and planning to the new normal (OECD [2021](#)). Since 2020, the pandemic has resulted in a new urgency to deal with unexpected disruptions of different nature (i.e., economic, financial, monetary, and natural catastrophes), so planning should develop a transdisciplinary "culture of strategic improvisation" (Meadows and Kreutz [2022](#)) and "tact-"solutions intended as tactical (Lydon et al. [2015](#)) and tactfully (Kornberger et al. [2019](#)).

In this context, Superblocks principles constitute a fundamental basis to develop a new normal approach. Cities are unique entities in terms of shape and socio-economic features and hugely differ in how they operate. As a consequence, the Superblocks-related method applied in Barcelona's grid system will not fit in other cities. Despite this, the document Barcelona Superblocks Government Measure embraces new urban planning and governance culture and solutions because it introduces a comprehensive and transformative change from a rich repertoire of novel solutions toward sustainability, resilience, and ecological transition. The interventions regarding five main axes (public space, improvement of neighborhoods and venues, reactivation of the economic fabric, mobility, and public housing) constitute thus the culmination of a long-term process accelerated by the pandemic that may match the challenges of not just the pandemic but other future disruptions.

To sum up, Superblocks have strongly changed fundamental parts of governance and planning affecting Barcelona and channeled different kinds of comprehensive and cross-cutting transformation at the following level. First, the application of Superblocks' principles envisages a comprehensive city model as it revises the historical priorities and the substantive goals of the local urban policies. The redevelopment of Barcelona's urban environment has been driven by a private-fostered urban expansion model mostly since the 1980s (Camerin [2019](#)). Superblocks comprise instead of public-financed actions that may overcome speculative approaches to urban regeneration actions. Second, Superblocks force the citizens to change their common habits by providing new human-scaled urban designs. The Superblocks' global approach—understanding public spaces as a common asset, protecting neighborhoods from traffic, reducing pollution and accidents, and strengthening pedestrian rights and social cohesion—puts the human being at the center of the open spaces in Barcelona, letting people move safely with health benefits. Third, the renaturalization of public spaces improves the sense of safety and security with planted elements and soft (permeable) surfaces. These are other relevant factors for the urban design of these new spaces that would enable cities to combat future excessive waterproofing.

22.5. Conclusions

The 2020 pandemic period has demonstrated that the future will be radically open and widely unknown and that further disruptions are likely. The implementation of Barcelona's Superblocks has been strongly related to a program of comprehensive and cross-cutting strategies implemented in terms of urban governance and planning over the last 10 years. Several sectorial plans regarding climate change, housing, mobility, and nature have fostered the idea of adopting a new city model. This change occurred on the basis of concepts such as ecological transition, resilience, and sustainability to contrast but also to adapt and learn how to deal with persisting economic, environmental, and social challenges of the twenty-first century. The two main lessons learned from this work can be the following.

First, COVID-19 as an urban pandemic **has been** a catalyst for change. The urban nature of the pandemic has exacerbated structural vulnerabilities in the profit-driven European city-making process and evidenced that economic and environmental resilience should be put at the center of the new normal. Barcelona **set** the foundation for such change on a wider strategy since 2012 based on environmental sustainability and local citizens' welfare.

Second, COVID-19 has acted as an accelerator for the application of pre-existing approaches toward resilience and sustainability in urban planning and governance strategies. The implementation of Superblocks was conceived before the pandemic and later considered the ground zero for the new normal in urban planning and governance. The positive results of Superblocks have been achieved through extensive dialog with local citizens and stakeholders to collectively reflect about reshaping Barcelona as a whole. The strategy focused on making daily life the central concern of urban planning and governance, bringing cohesion to neighborhoods and driving the ecological transition. It is worth highlighting that Superblocks have been launched with multi-governance tools such as the "2020 climate emergency declaration" on the basis of fundamental statements by the City Council: "Tackling the change requires all of us to be involved. We need to join forces with all the players involved. Now... or never" (Ajuntament de Barcelona [2020a](#): 5).

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