

# VALLCARCA ´S AVINGUDA

## Will the building of a new green avenue require the demolition of living spaces?

**Summary** | The plan for the green avenue project in Vallcarca is part of a modification of the General Metropolitan Plan of Barcelona approved in 2002 with development of the green boulevard originally set to require the demolition of buildings and living spaces. The plan, which has been on hold for about twenty years, faces severe opposition by some neighbourhood groups while being strongly endorsed by others. Negotiations around its future are currently in process and the envisioned remodelling furthermore includes the construction of an underground stormwater tank, a parking spot for the municipal waste management company, and a station for electricity provisioning.

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July 20, 2021



**Figure 1.** Graffiti seen in Av Vallcarca. Text reads: *Let's build the Vallcarca that we want* ('Construïm la Vallcarca que volem').

### Intro: a green avenue for Vallcarca

The future of the buildings on Avenida Vallcarca planned for demolition is a main point of polarized contention in the community. The *Vallcarca Som Barri* association, which together with other entities led the participatory process to save the old part of the neighbourhood, considers that the 2002 plan reflects an obsolete form of urbanism. They defend that the renovation plans should not evict more people from the neighbourhood, referring to the approximately twenty households in the buildings that remain on Av Vallcarca, located between Bolívar St. and the modernist house Comas d'Argemir.

Representatives of the *AAVV Gràcia Nord-Vallcarca* neighbourhood group, on the other hand, argue that the original plan for the green boulevard, with its stipulated demolitions, is the best option for the future development of the zone. The association has been very active in all participatory processes around the renovation.

The city district has three clearly marked development needs or objectives for the area: first is the construction of a rainwater tank to prevent the flooding of the Lesseps tunnel and Gran de Gràcia area; the second, an electrical distribution and supply station; and the third, a facility for the municipal waste management company.

While the current design foresees the demolition of the buildings located between Ballester St. and Agramunt St., alternatives have been explored and proposed by *Vallcarca Som Barri*. In interviews, technical staff at Barcelona City Council do recognise that Barcelona is now transitioning into a more inclusive and participatory approach to urban planning, where neighbours have a strong influence in decision-making processes.

### History and context in terms of greening

The first Metropolitan General Plan (PGM) that affected Vallcarca dates back to 1976. Though it was never executed, it induced the degradation of the neighbourhood (as it did not allow for any improvements in the buildings envisioned for demolishing). Renovated in 2002, the second plan stipulated the destruction of the historical centre of the neighbourhood along with the construction of a broad road connecting the centre of Barcelona with the Collserola mountain. Members of the *Plataforma d'Afectades per l'Eix Verd* (an association of residents affected by the green axis) maintain that the plan was merely an excuse to fit three city infrastructures: an electricity distribution station (imposed from Madrid -Red Eléctrica Española); a subterranean parking for BCNeta, the municipal waste management service; and the pluvial water tank aimed at minimizing the impact of rainwater below *Diagonal* avenue.

Until 2008, when the PSC (Party of the Socialists of Catalonia) had an absolute majority in the city council, there was a cycle of expropriations and demolitions that came to a halt with the economic crisis. This process went along with the acquisition of empty plots and buildings by construction and real estate companies such as *Núñez i Navarro*.

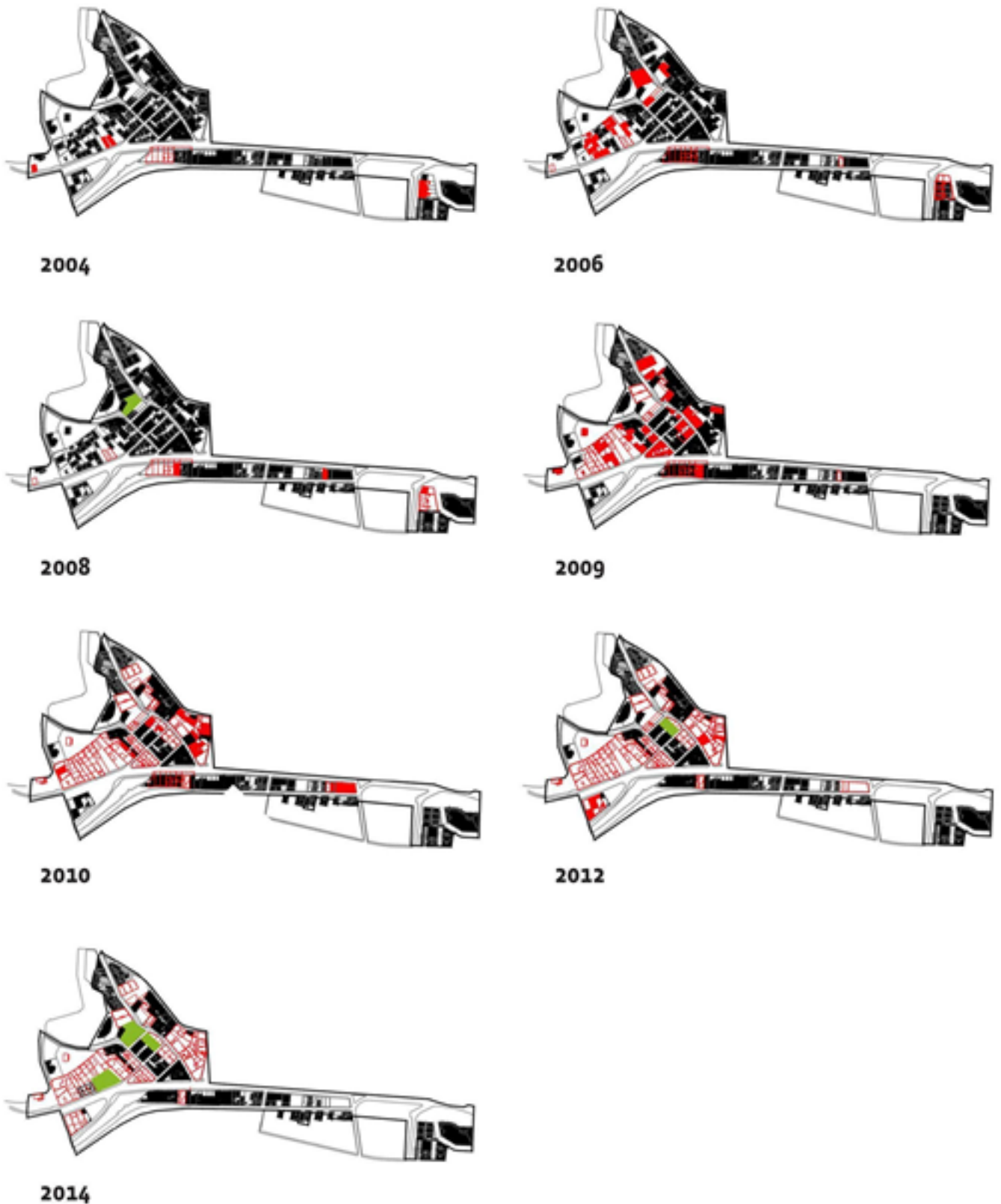


Figure 2. Affected area by the MPGM 2002 (years 2004–2014). Areas in red show demolitions. In green, vacant lots appropriated by residents. Source: [Asamblea de Vallcarca \(2016\)](#), in Antunesa et al. (2020)

From the *Franquismo* era until 2011, the neighbourhood of Vallcarca has been marked by a slow degradation process that neighbours and scholars refer to as *urbanicidi*. The urban plans designed for the neighbourhood

affected many buildings that were gradually abandoned because the City administration refused to issue the necessary permits for their renovation. The ethnographic work by Stanchieri (2015) explains how neighbours tried to fix the façades of their own houses at night to avoid being caught. Seeing the deterioration of their houses, many neighbours accepted the funding offered from the City council which was expropriating a number of buildings during that time. These houses, however, were not demolished due to the arrival of the economic crisis. In 2009 a large movement of young squatter activists emerged in the neighborhood, who occupied the vacant houses and restored them, collectivizing unused plots and transforming them into spaces of communal life. Vallcarca was the neighbourhood with the second largest number of squatted houses in Europe (Romero, 2016).

Neighbours from the *AAVV Gracia Nord-Vallcarca* association were among those against the squatting movement and insisted on the demolition of squatted buildings in Av Vallcarca, arguing that illegal occupation denigrates the image and prosperity of the neighbourhood. Members of the association expressed a desire to “dignify and clean the neighbourhood”. Notably, many of the association’s members live along the future green avenue on Bolívar St. in a relatively new building located along, that is taller than what is legally allowed at present. The envisioned 2002 Metropolitan General Plan (MPGM) permitted such height, as the width of the new avenue would have allowed for the presence of taller buildings.

On the other side of the spectrum, the *Assamblea de Vallcarca* (Assembly of Vallcarca) formed in 2012 with a dozen entities and interested people (eventually uniting with *Vallcarca Som Barri*). Based on the advice of *Arquitectes Sense Fronteres*, the Assembly worked on the reformulation of the 2002 project, using local and participatory community planning.

In May 2014, the neighbourhood of Vallcarca entered a new urban phase. The Department of Urban Habitat of Barcelona City Council signed the Modification of the Metropolitan General Plan (MPGM) of the Vallcarca Farigola sector, which focused on its historical centre. The green avenue project, however, did not incorporate participatory processes, until the election of *Barcelona En Comú* to the city council (2015). These in turn led to a formal modification in the (MPGM) (signed in 2018) stipulating greater preservation of the patrimony and the land for public use. Yet, in the words of members of the local neighbourhood assemblies, authentic, non-technical dialogue on the future of the avenue involving all impacted stakeholders still has not taken place. The most contentious point is certainly the demolition of houses between Agramunt St. and Ballester St. in Av Vallcarca.

Meanwhile, the *AAVV Gracia Nord-Vallcarca*, together with seven other associations, appealed the decision to postpone the 2002 MPGM in court, arguing that similar other projects (such as General Mitre from Balmales, Travassera de Dalt from Lesseps, or Avinguda Diagonal) have been successfully tendered and executed, while the green avenue remains unattended. Interviewees explain that those affected by the demolition were supposed to be relocated to the building where members of *AAVV Gracia Nord-Vallcarca* are currently living (situated in front of Av Vallcarca). Yet over time the empty flats have been occupied and there is no longer enough space for all of those affected.

Views on relocation also differ. According to a technician at Barcelona’s Department of Urban Ecology, one of the buildings accommodating those relocated after the demolition of the historical centre of Vallcarca is informally called ‘the cemetery’. Having previously lived in old, but larger, single-family houses with small patios, the move to 50-70 m<sup>2</sup> flats presented a drastic change in their way of life that has been shown by several studies to have generated negative experiences.

When negotiations around the green avenue project restarted in 2018, the *Plataforma d’Afectades per l’Eix Verd* (People Affected by the Green Axis) was founded. The platform encompasses all those affected by potential demolitions, as well as associations and community members that support them. One of their victories was the collectivisation and recovery of *Farigola Square* (as part of modification of the PGM approved

in 2018), the historical school *Can Carol*, and the cooperative winery *La Riera*. Some of these groups still meet in *La Fusteria*, an old carpentry workshop and the last building standing in the initial section of Argentera St., in the old historic centre affected by MPGM 2002.

### What stage is it in now?

The PMG modifications of 2018 stipulated that demolitions shall only affect the stretch from Agramunt St. to the modernist house Comas d'Argemí, which includes a number of important community spaces: the La Riera winery, the Old School squatted house and the Ateneu Popular de Vallcarca social centre.



**Figure 3.** Old town and avenue in Vallcarca neighbourhood. Red line shows the area affected by the MPGM 2002; green line shows the currently disputed area for the green avenue.

The two associations and the city council maintain different positions with respect to the three city infrastructures envisioned in Av Vallcarca: the water tank, the parking for BCNeta, and the electric supply and distribution station. A member from the *Plataforma d'Afectades per l'Eix Verd* says that the construction of these infrastructures also determines the type of plants and trees that can be placed above ground. The building of these infrastructures would preclude the planting of trees with long roots and only allow for small bushes and some grass, making it difficult to argue for a 'green lung' effect. Following this criteria, the association *Som Barri*, members of *Afectades per l'Eix Verd* (People Affected by the Green Avenue), and other supporters have put forward an alternative project elaborated by a group of architects that maintains the size, quality, and character of the green areas. The groups argue for a green avenue that does not entail the demolition of homes and rather contemplates 10.000 m<sup>2</sup> of (new) green areas through the reduction of car lanes. Currently, Av Vallcarca and Bolívar St. have four car lanes, which they suggest reducing by half through the widening and greening of sidewalks. They also propose the pedestrianization Agramunt St. The proposal is based on converting all abandoned and deteriorated plots into green areas, disincentivizing cars rather than displacing neighbours. Instead of tearing down houses, they propose to rehabilitate them and introduce greenery in their façades.



Figure 4. Alternative proposal from Som Barri for the green avenue of Vallcarca / XFDC

Members from the *AAVV Gracia Nord-Vallcarca*, on the other hand, defend the initial proposal for a broad green boulevard as an environmental and social need for the neighbourhood.

### What next?

Many of the opposition groups share the sentiment of being treated like “second class citizens”, yet their motives for development of the avenue vary substantially. Members of *AAVV Gracia Nord-Vallcarca* call for a green boulevard that “dignifies” Vallcarca while representatives of the *Afectades per l’Eix Verd* worry that the main objective of the (re)developed avenue will be to gentrify the neighbourhood and (re)valorise the buildings around the avenue.

The city council has since decided that the plan cannot be implemented as originally designed as this would require significant bureaucratic adjustments to local laws and stipulations leaving any future modification still undecided. This leaves three major unclear futures: whether three city installations and green spaces will be prioritized, whether the houses in Av. Vallcarca will remain, or whether the plan will allow for an alternative intermediate solution.

Technicians from the district believe that once the technical details have been clarified, the city council should act as an arbitrator between the different neighbourhood groups. They share the necessity to disseminate, explain and ‘socialize’ urban planning, so that all neighbours are aware of the technical aspects of any remodelling proposal, as a way to facilitate their inclusion in decision-making.

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