

BON PASTOR: ‘BARCELONA OF THE FUTURE’

From Mercedes-Benz factory to low-traffic zone: Why do Neighborhood Initiatives fear gentrification due to the newly proposed *superilla*?

Summary | Bon Pastor is a neighborhood in the Sant Andreu district located in northeast Barcelona on the banks of the Besòs River. The neighborhood has a deep cultural heritage and a rich history of struggle and resistance. The neighborhood now faces the threat of gentrification caused by the private development of disused industrial buildings, after ConrenTramway, a Spanish real estate investment and asset manager firm, bought the 90,641 square meter Bon Pastor Mercedes-Benz factory in November 2018. The City Council and ConrenTramway, in a public-private collaboration, aim to create an additional *superilla*, a traffic-regulated 3x3 cell of nine city blocks designed to divert cars to its perimeter and maximize public space in its interior. This design has drawn praise as well as significant controversy, raising concerns of reduced mobility and green gentrification. Though the investors have painted the development as a sustainability project, lifelong residents are concerned with how the transformation will affect their cost of living as well as the social fabric and cultural identity of the neighborhood. Furthermore, the ConrenTramway development has spurred the interest of other investors, adding to the existing green gentrification pressures felt by local residents.

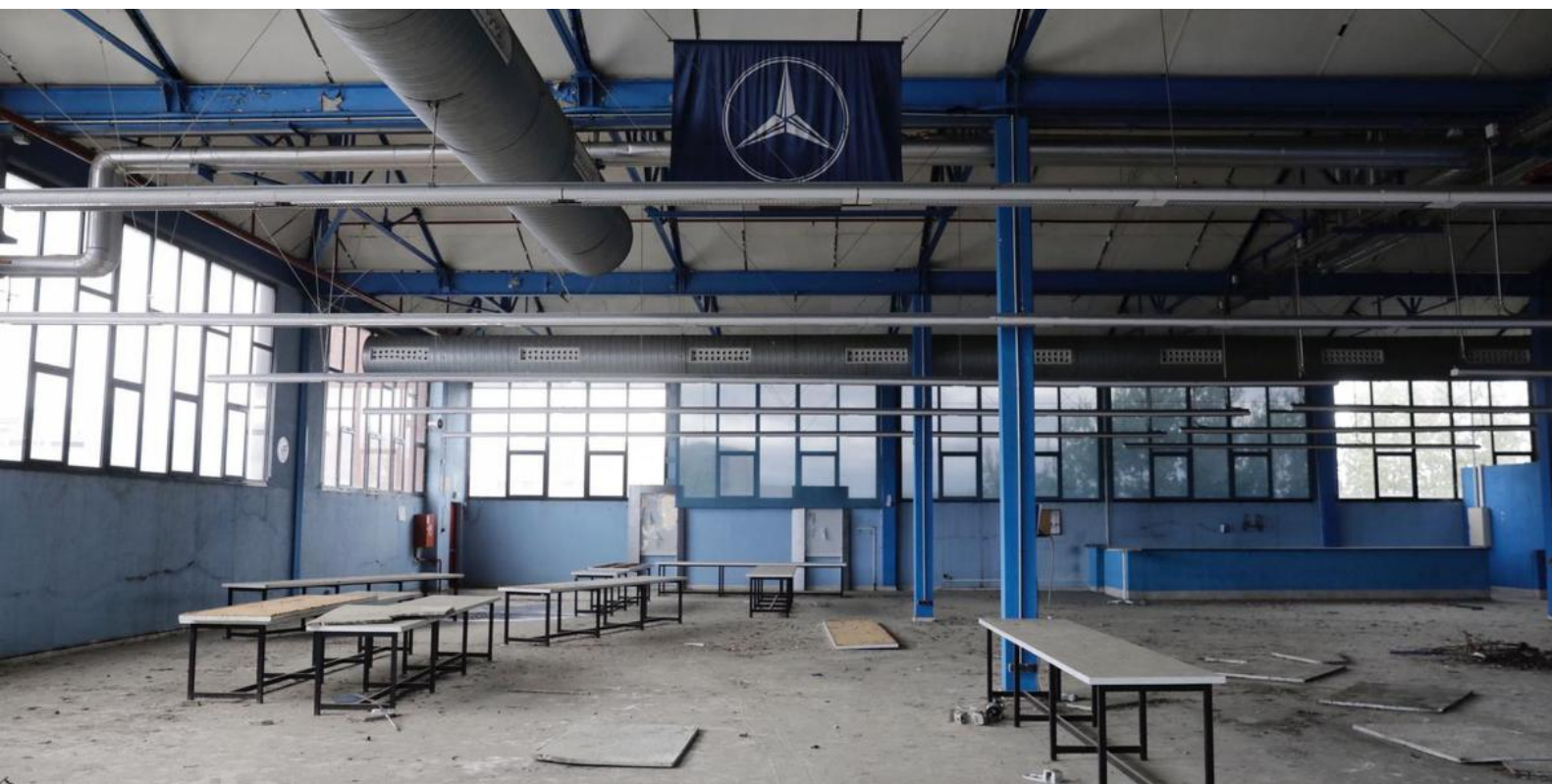
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Introduction

Bon Pastor is a neighborhood in the Sant Andreu district located in the northeast of Barcelona on the banks of the Besòs River. In November 2018, the real estate development company, ConrenTramway, bought the Bon Pastor Mercedes-Benz Factory. The group agreed with the Barcelona City Council to turn the 90,641 square meter site into a *superilla* with new facilities, green spaces and improved connections with the rest of the city. The City Council also claims this will come as part of Bon Pastor's mission to become an emissions-neutral neighborhood and one of the first to meet the objectives of the 2030 agenda. The council has referred to this plan as the 'Barcelona of the future' (Farré, 2021). ConrenTramway is responsible for the development of other areas of Barcelona, such as 22@ in the Sant Martí district, contributing to an acute rise in land prices (Dalmau Pujol, 2021).

In response, groups like the Housing Syndicate of Sant Andreu have organized against the neoliberal development model threatening long-time residents in the area. Since 2000, neighborhood residents have already undergone extreme cultural disruption due to the demolition and reconstruction of their social housing complex, Casas Baratas. The redevelopment of the Mercedes-Benz factory is now pushing gentrification to new levels as public land is reclassified and land speculation is spurred by the arrival of technology companies like Leitat and thousands of new university educated residents (Dalmau Pujol, 2021). In response to these significant pressures from private developers, neighborhood residents and allies are fighting against the disappearance of their unique history, homes and ways of life.

Neighborhood History

While the first recorded history of the area dates back to the 12th century, its population significantly increased beginning in the early 20th century, when large industrial companies developed in Sant Andreu and the district drew a large working-class population. In 1929, within the Spanish legislation's Low-Cost Affordable Homes Act, the Municipal Housing Board built a row of 784 single-family houses called Milans del Bosch, now often referred to as Casas Baratas. At the time these houses were constructed, Bon Pastor was somewhat of an urban center in the middle of a rural and agricultural landscape (Angosto, 2019). In 1937, during the Spanish War, Bon Pastor suffered from targeted bombings, causing considerable loss of life, property damage and the destruction of Casas Baratas (Keeley, 2021). Later in 1945, the neighborhood was annexed to Barcelona, drawing more residents to the area (Historia de Bon Pastor, n.d.). Under Franco, Bon Pastor grew as an industrial and workers' housing center and also simultaneously developed a rich anarchist counter-culture whereby the streets became a tool for residents to collectively resist Franco's military regime (Portelli, 2020).

Plans for redeveloping Casas Baratas began in 1968, having become an emblematic piece of the neighborhood, its resident history and pride (Angosto, 2019). In 1999, the Municipal Housing Board approved a plan to demolish the remaining houses and replace them with housing blocks, which was quickly followed by the 2000 plan "Bon Pastor: A neighborhood with a future" promoting a new housing development as a sustainable endeavor.

While the City Council called the process "participative," scholar-activists and residents suggest something different. Government entities and those who stood to gain from development pushed a campaign to portray the old Bon Pastor as undesirable, dangerous, and even somehow sinful (Portelli, 2015). Additionally, one neighborhood association silenced all dissenting voices and presented itself as the sole representative of the community. The association organized a referendum on the demolitions only after the municipal plan had been approved, and gained a thin majority of 'yes' votes to a misleading question (Portelli, 2020).

In response, then organization Fem Bon Pastor, then called the Associated Independent Neighbors, fought in 2003 against the renovations of Casas Baratas, in opposition to demolishing the cheap houses with new

contract conditions and stipulations for the tenants in regards to contracted housing tenancy period. Nevertheless, in the 2000's, the demolitions of Casas Baratas ensued. Despite eviction resistance, lawsuits and controversy over the poor quality of some flats, more than 2,000 residents were offered units in the new blocks and most residents asked for either economic compensation or new rental agreements for the new flats (Delmau Pujol, 2021). While most residents managed to remain in the same place, the internal displacement impacted mutual aid networks and a different kind of gentrification and cultural disruption took shape (Portelli, 2020). The verticalization and increased density of living spaces changed the sense of community and place, noted by the Barcelona municipality on its website as having resulted in a consequential decrease in the use of public space (Historia de Bon Pastor, 2018).

This history of trauma following transformation as a result of privatization and cultural disruption has culminated in the massive development projects and urban regeneration plans seen today. Despite their history of struggle and resistance, the residents of Bon Pastor need allies from outside the community in order to combat this new wave of injustice.

The Current Conflict

The fight of Bon Pastor residents against development and gentrification has been a long one. While it initially centered around Casas Baratas and the threat of urban renewal projects on cultural heritage and community traditions, the focus now turns to big-time real estate developers and the threat of speculation, privatization and large-scale gentrification.

The momentum for ConrenTramway development plans has continuously increased into 2021 as property prices have doubled since the purchasing of the Mercedes-Benz factory in 2018 (Delmau Pujol, 2021). That surrounding areas have also been undergoing renewal processes resulting in displacement of long-term residents, including La Sagrera, Plaza de las Glòries, 22@, Campus Diagonal-Besòs and Santander Bridge, serves as empirical evidence of the damaging effects of these urban renewal schemes.

In order for the project to move forward, the Ajuntament requires processes of participatory zoning practices that would gather residents to voice concerns, however this bears many similarities to the “participatory” processes of the Casas Baratas neighborhood which ultimately left long-time residents feeling unrepresented and displaced.

Contacts

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