

# EIXAMPLE RESPIRA

## Is Eixample's new cycling lane setting an Example for environmentally just urban planning?

**Summary** | The Eixample district in Barcelona has been increasingly characterised by high levels of air and noise pollution and automobile traffic. Much of it is concentrated in one of the city's main arteries, Carrer Aragó, which has often been the target of protests since the 1990s when social movements pushed for its transformation into a boulevard ("rambla" or "passeig") with reduced traffic. Eixample Respira was formed as a neighborhood platform to raise awareness on air pollution and demand action to reduce car traffic and increase the presence of low-impact mobility and green space in the district. Through mobilizations that have extended from the neighborhood to various cities in Spain, the platform aims to promote a city model that guarantees the right to a healthy city with a particular emphasis on children and their school surroundings. The recently inaugurated (2020) cycling lane on Carrer Aragó, as part of the expansion of cycling infrastructure during the COVID-19 pandemic, is a first step towards the wider framework of revindications in Eixample for clean air, street pacification, greening and community spaces as integral elements of urban justice at the neighborhood level.

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Figure 1. Members of Eixample Respira protesting around schools. Source: [Cat El País](#)

Eixample Respira is a neighborhood platform in the Eixample district, founded by engaged citizens in 2019. Driven by their disillusionment with the administration and its inability to resolve the problem of exceedingly high air pollution levels (above European Union legal standards and the World Health Organization recommendations), the platform aims to raise awareness and in the words of their spokesperson, Guille López, “stop its proceeding normalisation, as well as to audit and pressure the different administrative bodies, from the municipal up to the European level”.<sup>1</sup>

Air and noise pollution in central Barcelona is mostly produced by heavy combustion-powered car traffic. Eixample Respira (2019) points out the prevailing existence of urban highways in the district, especially pointing to Carrer Aragó, Gran Vía, Carrer Marina, and Carrer Valencia and their high daily throughput of cars on multilane streets. After the inauguration of the ring roads in the context of the urban restructuring that occurred for the Olympic Games in 1992, streets like Aragó and Gran Vía mark the two most recent vehicular corridors to be developed (Tello, 1996). An average of 350.000 cars cross the Eixample on a daily basis, making the neighborhood the most trafficked and polluted in all of Barcelona (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2021). The struggle to convert the remaining urban highway of Carrer Aragó into a more pedestrian and bike-friendly space dates back to the 1980s & 1990s, when movements such as *Amics de la Bici* and *Barcelona Estalvia Energia* campaigned to transform the street into a boulevard (*passeig*) that prioritized integrated mobility over motorised vehicles (Subirana, 2020).



**Figure 2.** Logo from "Revolta Escolar" claiming for more health and safety and less noise, pollution and cars. Source: <https://www.revoltaescolar.cat/>

As one of the most densely populated areas in Europe, the Eixample’s unhealthy amounts of hazardous pollutants affect a considerably high number of residents at once (Eixample Respira, 2019). The negative impact on health, including increased risk for lung cancer, strokes, heart attacks, childhood asthma, behavioural problems and obesity (See de Bont et al., 2019; Forns et al., 2016; Pierangeli, Nieuwenhuijsen, Cirach & Rojas-Rueda, 2020) is a major issue that Eixample Respira raises awareness about through banners,

<sup>1</sup> Quoted and translated to English from a personal interview conducted in Spanish with Guille López (spokesperson of Eixample Respira) on March 10th, 2021.

speeches, and protests that gather residents from across the district. Under the hashtags #RevoltaEscolar and #RevoltaVeïnal (school and neighborhood revolt), the group claims the right to a healthy city, with a particular emphasis on schools as the places where children spend most of their time. Parents of schoolchildren led the initiative, organizing actions in collaboration with residents, schools, and family associations. The group also launched a map displaying the level of air pollutants of each school in Barcelona<sup>2</sup> and coordinated regular demonstrations calling for reduced traffic in streets across Barcelona and other cities of Spain, increasing pressure on governments to implement street pacification, traffic reduction and more public space for pedestrians.

The issue is one of spatial, social, and environmental injustice. While only 26,04% of daily displacements happen by private motorised vehicles in Barcelona (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2020a), more than half of the public surface is covered by automobile infrastructure. The predominance of cars in urban highways like Carrer Aragó do not allow for safe mixed mobility use, posing a risk to residents, pedestrians, and cyclists. In addition, the extent of subsidised public car parking and promoted automobile consumption underscores a normalized yet deeply problematic politics of mass private transit.

The Barcelona City Council's current urban mobility plan seeks to accomplish the European limit value by 2024 (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2020a), but according to representatives of Eixample Respira, current measures such as the low-emission zones and the closure of streets to motorised traffic on weekends ("obrim els carrers") are not enough. A report launched by the Barcelona Public Health Agency evaluating the low emission zone has shown that the new sanctions have not led to any significant change in the levels of NO<sub>2</sub> (Agència de Salut Pública de Barcelona, 2021).



**Figure 3.** Image used by Eixample Respira claiming the daily life at Aragó street. Source: [Twitter Eixample respira](https://twitter.com/EixampleRespira)

<sup>2</sup> Available here <https://www.contaminacio.cat/escoles/>

The arrival of COVID-19 as a serious threat to public health has pushed the municipality to take action with a “public space adaptation plan” (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2020c), launched after the first wave of the pandemic in spring 2020 and aimed at adding 501.000m<sup>2</sup> of pedestrian surface and a total of 21,3km of bicycle lanes to grant safer public passages across Barcelona (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2020d). These recent efforts included the creation of new bus lanes and the 4,8km-long bike lane in Carrer Aragó (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2020b). For the historical grassroots movements struggling for just mobility and environmental justice (Tello, 1996; Amics de la Bici, 2017; Subirana, 2020) for more than thirty years, this was indeed a step in the right direction. Further demands include regular weekend street closures and the incorporation of these highly trafficked streets such as Aragó into more ambitious plans such as “Barcelona Superilla”, which aims to transform a series of streets in the Eixample into superblocks, creating new public squares and implementing green corridors with vegetation and permeable paving (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2021).

Eixample Respira has managed to link the problems and demands of a specific neighborhood throughout the city and beyond. With continuous mobilizations on various fronts, citizens continue to use their collective knowledge and political force for the prioritization of air quality improvement and for more public space for walking, cycling and recreation in the city.

## Links

#Eixample Respira

Web: <https://www.eixamplerespira.com/>

Blog: <https://medium.com/eixample-respira>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/eixrespira>

Youtube: [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCoLRBx37ISd\\_vVq93WJ8Qnw](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCoLRBx37ISd_vVq93WJ8Qnw)

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/eixamplerespira/>

Mail: [eixample.respira@gmail.com](mailto:eixample.respira@gmail.com)

## #RevoltaEscolar

PTAs (Parents and Teachers Associations), in collaboration with neighbourhood organizations, are carrying out roadblocks every 2 weeks on Fridays when leaving school to demand city officials greater street traffic pacification and safety of school environments, less pollution and less noise. The protest started in Barcelona in December 2020, with 20 schools performing 17 roadblocks. It's been growing ever since! The February 26th 2020, the sixth consecutive day of protests, there were more than 75 mobilized schools in eight different cities. They are calling it #RevoltaEscolar (school rebellion).

Web: <https://www.revoltaescolar.cat/>

## #RevoltaVeinal

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1nPhCGudosSaSHg1A8b91DmWjArC\\_WIXT-XNncNUpUqU/](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1nPhCGudosSaSHg1A8b91DmWjArC_WIXT-XNncNUpUqU/)

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