

GRÀCIA'S TREE PROJECT

How did the activist group 'Salvem L'Alzina' protect Gracia's architectural and ecological heritage from gentrification?

Summary | In November 2018, residents in Gràcia formed a collective called *Salvem l'alzina i les casetes del carrer Encarnació* to protect a space of natural and architectural heritage from speculative development in what is already a highly gentrified neighborhood. The site consists of two historic houses and a large garden, including a 200-year-old holm oak tree, all of which was to be destroyed and turned into luxury flats with no green space. The collective's campaign against this gentrifying plan led it to be overturned. The property was expropriated from the previous owners by the city council and the houses were registered in Barcelona's catalogue of architectural heritage. The garden will be open for public use and there will be a democratic process for the community to decide what the houses will be used for, in addition to social housing.

Author: Aeve Ribbons (ICTA master student)

Editor: Panagiota Kotsila (BCNUEJ, UAB, ICTA)

July 20, 2021

BCNUEJ Barcelona
Laboratory for Urban
Environmental Justice
and Sustainability



Figure 1. Illustration of Carrer Encarnació 13-17. Source: <https://twitter.com/SalvemAlzina>

In 2018, in the district of Gràcia, a plan was put in place to demolish two historic houses (*les casetes*) in *Carrer Encarnació* (numbers 13-15-17) and an adjacent green space home to an emblematic 200-year-old holm oak tree (*l'alzina*) (Baldrich 2019). The real estate company that owned the property, Encarnació Invest SL, had obtained permission to construct 28 50m² flats and a large parking space scheduled to open on November 7th, 2018. In the context of gentrification and lack of green space in Gràcia, this project represented a culmination of yet another socio-environmental injustice for local residents. Neighborhood collectives strongly contested it, stressing that the project threatened one of Gràcia's few green spaces while also destroying an example of Catalan cultural and architectural heritage protected by law (Guitar I Agell & Pujol 1993).



Figure 2. Carrer Encarnació 13-17, with the holm oak to the left. Photo taken by author, 20/03/2021.



Figure 3. Carrer Encarnació 13-17. Photo taken by author, 20/03/2021.

Gràcia is one of Barcelona’s most heavily gentrified neighborhoods, with rapidly rising housing and rental prices. Half of the families who rent in Gràcia spend over 40% of their income on rent, while the number of tourist flats in the neighborhood jumped from 257 in 2011 to 1088 in 2015. Longer-term residents feel they are being pushed out and that homes are under constant real estate speculation, with the overwhelming feeling that housing prices are inflated, speculated, and manufactured. At the same time, Gràcia is the district with the lowest amount of public green space in all of Barcelona’s districts and the second-lowest in terms of ratio of public green space per inhabitant (3.15m²/inhabitant) (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2020).



Figure 4. Poster from the “5 Punts Per A 5 Barris” campaign (Salvem L’alzina 2019 a).

The planned development in Carrer Encarnació was obstructed by residents who occupied the property after just one day of operations in 2018. This marked the start of an assembly-based collective entitled *Salvem l'alzina i les casetes del carrer Encarnació*, which has been campaigning for the protection and public ownership of the two houses and the surrounding green space. This involved clearing out the long-abandoned property, inspecting the buildings’ structural integrity and contesting the property owner’s claim that demolition was required due to the buildings’ “state of ruin”. Neighbors and members of the collective demanded agency and protagonism in the reshaping and management of urban space, “using inhabitation itself as a device that keeps things in some kind of proximity” in the face of “imminent expendability” (Simone

2014). Through the process of organizing, strong bonds were also built between activists. As they said, “it was the start of an incredible social and personal learning process” (Interview by author).

This struggle led to the collective calling on Barcelona City Council to catalogue the oak tree and the *casetes* as both natural and architectural Catalan heritage, and to expropriate the property from its owners, demanding that the space be repurposed to fulfill the social and environmental needs of the community. These demands were sent to the City Council in a petition signed by over 12,000 residents (Aparicio, Berga, de Arquer and Móra 2020). Combining social and environmental demands, the collective was determined and committed to “fight for all of it..., because the city needs it”. Within months of the occupation, the progressive government of the City Council agreed to add the oak tree to Barcelona’s catalogue of natural heritage and to expropriate the property (Baldrich 2019). Moreover, the City Council bought the entire property from its owners in early 2020, ensuring that the buildings and the surrounding green space would be used to serve the neighborhood (El País 2020).



Figure 5. Assembly of *Salvem l'alzina i les casetes* del carrer Encarnació. Source: <https://www.salvemlalzina.org/galeria-dimatges/>

Nevertheless, the struggle is far from over. Now that the property is protected and under public ownership, the members of *Salvem l'alzina* are aiming to set up an association for the communal management of the garden in 2021 and will start a participative process for the neighborhood to decide what the *casetes* will be used for (in addition to social housing) and how they will be managed.

The *Salvem l'alzina* case offers a valuable point of reference for urban environmental justice in its combined struggle for housing, architectural heritage and green space. The outcome has significant implications for the community's fight against speculation and gentrification: the future transformation of the *casetes* into social housing and other much-needed public amenities and green space, and their protection as cultural heritage, can make sure that the resulting benefits to well-being, health and community will be shared among local residents and community members. Through its campaign to protect green space by overturning a gentrifying development project, *Salvem l'alzina* provides a hopeful counterpoint to green gentrification and the commodification of urban spaces often seen in many urban neighborhoods in Western global cities.

Contacts

Salvem L'Alzina i les casetes d'Encarnació: Popular assembly group created spontaneously by residents in defense of the estates of C / Encarnació 15-17, to defend historic buildings and the bicentennial oak of the garden against speculation in the neighborhood of Gràcia.

Website: www.salvemlalzina.org/mobilize/

Facebook: www.facebook.com/groups/2181672915430112

Twitter: @SalvemAlzina

Bibliography

@SalvemAlzina (2021, 5th January). Twitter. Retrieved from:

<https://twitter.com/SalvemAlzina/status/1346473143494328321?s=20>

@SalvemAlzina (2019, 6th November). Twitter. Retrieved from:

<https://twitter.com/SalvemAlzina/status/1192119616715272192?s=20>

Ajuntament de Barcelona (2020), *Plan del Verde y de la Biodiversidad de Barcelona 2020*. Retrieved from:

https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/ecologiaurbana/sites/default/files/PlanVerde_2020.pdf

Aparicio, M., Berga, L., de Arquer, L. and Móra, O. (2020, 8th December), *Catalogació i restauració de les Casetes d'Encarnació*. Decidim.Barcelona. Retrieved from:

[https://www.decidim.barcelona/processes/patrimonigracia/f/3256/proposals/25354#_ =](https://www.decidim.barcelona/processes/patrimonigracia/f/3256/proposals/25354#_=)

Baldrich, P. (2019, 22nd January), *Salvem L'Alzina, la movida vecinal que desafió al Ayuntamiento*. Metrópoli

Abierta. Retrieved from: https://www.metropoliabierta.com/distritos/gracia/salvem-l-alzina-la-movida-vecinal-que-desafio-al-ayuntamiento_13664_102.html

El País (2020, 17th January), *L'Ajuntament de Barcelona comprarà les casetes de Gràcia*. Retrieved from:

https://cat.elpais.com/cat/2020/01/17/catalunya/1579258150_266230.html

Guitar I Agell, J. and Pujol, J. (1993), *Ley 9/1993, de 30 de septiembre, del Patrimonio Cultural Catalán*. BOE Legislación Consolidada. Retrieved from: <https://www.boe.es/buscar/pdf/1993/BOE-A-1993-26497-consolidado.pdf>

Redaccio Societat (2019, 14th February), *Els Mossos d'Esquadra desallotgen les casetes d'Encarnació*.

Betevé. Retrieved from: <https://beteve.cat/societat/desallotjament-casetes-encarnacio-salvem-alzina-mossos/>

Salvem L'alzina (2018, 8th November), *Mobilize!* Retrieved from: <http://www.salvemlalzina.org/mobilize/>

Salvem L'alzina (2019 a, 12th March), *Manifest - 5 punts per a 5 barris*. Retrieved from:

<https://www.salvemlalzina.org/manifest-5-punts-per-a-5-barris/>

Salvem L'alzina (2019 b, 14th June), *Modificació Puntual del Pla General Metropolità per a la implantació d'una escola bressol i la inclusió en el pla especial del patrimoni arquitectònic historicoartístic de la ciutat de Barcelona (Districte de Gràcia) de les finques situades al Carrer de L'Encarnació 13-15 i 17*. Retrieved from:

<https://www.salvemlalzina.org/escrit-dallegacions/>

Salvem L'alzina (2021, 12th March), *Acta assemblea Salvem l'alzina i les casetes d'Encarnació (10/03/2021)*.

Retrieved from: <https://www.salvemlalzina.org/acta-assemblea-salvem-lalzina-i-les-casetes-dencarnacio-10-03-2021/>

Simone, A. (2014, 30th June), *AbdouMaliq Simone on Cities, Neoliberalism and the Commons*. Theory,

Culture & Society. Retrieved from: <https://www.theoryculturesociety.org/abdoumaliq-simone-on-cities-neoliberalism-and-the-commons/>