

VALLCARCA ´S SOCIAL HOUSING STRUGGLES

Should Vallcarca ´s green space be compromised for more social housing?

Summary | In dense cities like Barcelona, green areas are an issue of dispute. The vacant green terrains in the neighborhood of Vallcarca i Penitents, very close to the highway Ronda de Dalt, is no exception; any attempt to construct there sparks confrontation. This case narrates the current dispute regarding the construction of social housing for the elderly in Carretera de Sant Cugat and of a public high school in the gardens Doctor Comas i Llaberia. Here, issues like social housing, green spaces, and gentrification become interlinked in a neighborhood that has historically received little attention from the City Council administration.

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Figure 1. Render of the 34 social buildings destined for the elderly on Carretera de Sant Cugat. Source: [Ajuntament de Barcelona](#) (2020)

Intro: social housing in Vallcarca

The neighborhood of Vallcarca i Penitents was envisioned as a connection point between the centre of Barcelona and neighboring cities. This was during the *franquismo* era, when large-scale projects like the construction of the Ronda de Dalt beltway rendered the neighborhood as a transit hub, with ultimately negative impacts on the the atmosphere and livability of the area.

The neighborhood has multiple empty lots filled with rubble and a scarce availability of green and social areas. Currently, one of the ongoing disputes concerns the construction of social housing for elderly people and a public high school, both in green areas.

The city council prioritises the development of social housing in Vallcarca as a way to avoid gentrification in the neighborhood. Yet, this initiative has been generating tension between different neighbors' groups and the administration. All this takes place in a context where real estate developer Núñez i Navarro owns (and speculates with) 40% of the urban land in Vallcarca.

Constructing or rehabilitating?

At the [neighborhood council meeting](#) in December 2020, the construction of 34 social housing units on the green space between Carretera de l'Arrabassada and Passeig de la Vall d'Hebron was an issue of intense dispute. Despite the municipal representative's pledges that the construction would maintain enough green spaces and pedestrian pathways, many neighbors of Vallcarca opposed the construction.

Members from AAVV Gracia Nord – Vallcarca claim that purchasing and rehabilitating existing buildings is a more coherent and sustainable option that at the same time preserves scarce green space in Vallcarca. The preservation of existing green space in Vallcarca is primarily motivated by the high level of pollution due to the proximity of the Ronda de Dalt motorway, which is excluded from the Low Emission Zone. Neighbors also want to keep the green space because it serves as a meeting and socialising point. Other voices, on the other hand, see the necessity for social housing and argue that those opposing it simply do not want to have a new building spoil the views from their own homes, interpreting this as an elitist perspective in favour of gentrification. The green space in question is not formally classified as such in urbanistic plans but rather as a municipal facility. Current plans foresee its relocation above the Ronda de Dalt motorway, once it has been redeveloped and transferred underground. However, the completion date for this mega-project is unforeseen, and neighbors are dissatisfied with the proposed alternative.



Figure 2. *One of the green areas under dispute in Vallcarca* Source: [Nació Digital](#) (2020)

Another heated dispute involves the construction of a high school in Vallcarca. During a [neighborhood council meeting in 2020](#), parents from the various AFAs (Associations of Families of Students) of primary schools in the neighborhood demanded the construction of a high school planned since 2016 on the gardens of Dr. Comas i Llaberia gardens. According to the urbanistic plans, the gardens would be relocated to the nearby Anna Piferrer street. Neighbors forming part of the federation [Barris de Gracia](#), however, are against the construction of the high school. They claim that there are several semi-private schools (private schools that receive public funding) in the district that are deteriorated and require renovation, such as the Ribes Foundation or functioning semi-private high schools. The same argument holds for adapting existing buildings for social housing purposes.

According to the municipal staff working on public space in Barcelona, the construction of social housing for elderly people allows for a design that responds to the specific needs of this community, and is cheaper than appropriating and renovating existing buildings. The complexity of this debate is intensified by the presence of the real estate company Núñez i Navarro that owns and speculates with the majority of the potential terrains and buildings.

The City Council is nevertheless putting pressure on Núñez i Navarro to concede 30% of their flats for socially protected housing (see [new measures](#) approved in 2018), and to impede their acquisition of new building permits. The main campaign is led by several associations in Vallcarca, occupying plots owned by the real estate company as a means to confront speculation.

As a result of the modification of the urbanistic plan for the area in 2002, a series of expropriations by the administration took place. Many neighbors argue that the real estate company Núñez i Navarro bought 50% of the buildings planned for demolition knowing that the City Council would have to compensate them at market prices (El Crític, 2017).



Figure 3. Tweet from the Assembly of Vallcarca. The banner reads: “Núñez, you will not construct at the margins of an organised neighbourhood”.

Social mobilizations against neighbourhood deterioration

The neighborhood of Vallcarca has also organized multiple community actions. Some of the most active groups include The Libertarian Assembly Heura Negra, the Youth Assembly of Vallcarca, the Housing Union of Vallcarca, the Cultural Association of the Old Bakery of Vallcarca, the feminist Assembly La Brotada, the Committee for the Feminist Strike, and the existing food and mutual support networks.

One of their victories was the collectivisation and recovery of the Farigola Square, an empty lot planned for the construction of a private building. In 2007, the square was collectivized while still in disuse, and neighbors started a vegetable garden. After being destroyed by the City Council, which demolished the houses on the adjacent street and covered the garden’s water well with rubble, the neighbors repurposed the space as a meeting place with tables, chairs, a fountain, and children’s facilities. These actions led the square to be incorporated into the modification of the city’s overall plan (PGM) approved in 2018. Since then, multiple vegetable gardens have been created by neighbors in various abandoned plots. These are cultivated and defended collectively, and several fruit trees have been planted around the neighborhood.



Figure 4. Tweet from Desenruna. In English: “Saturday 27th March, at 10am. Let's start the big spring planting! 1. We will start planting the seedlings we have prepared. 2. We will plant flowers and aromatic plants. 3. We will fight capitalism! There will be food to share. Living gardens, strong neighborhoods!”

Some of these groups normally meet at La Fusteria, an old crafts workshop showcasing the union between various struggles in the neighborhood. It is the last building on the initial section of Argentera St. and has a great historical value that is defended and reclaimed by local groups. Other examples are the recovery of the terrains now used for the Vallcarca Farmers' Market, as well as the former school Can Carol, redesigned into a self-organized civic centre that opened in 2021. After being abandoned and pending demolition, the building was recovered by neighborhood groups and eventually rehabilitated by Barcelona City Council. Other spaces for cooperative works are the winery La Riera (located on Av Vallcarca), and the self-organized public bike workshop Biciosxs.

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