BHIDGING AND BONDING
Public space and immigrant integration in Barcelona’s el Raval

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Introduction
Immigration has become one of the most important political and social issues of the 21st century. Politicians in the U.S., Brazil, Hungary, Italy, Sweden, and elsewhere have campaigned successfully on nationalist platforms, and in many countries anti-immigrant discourse, racially discriminatory incidents, and hate crimes are at an all-time high (Kishi 2017; Lopez, Gonzalez-Barrera, and Krogstad 2018). Such sentiments are particularly pronounced in countries that have struggled to create positive environments into which immigrants can integrate, and leaders of these countries frequently blame immigrants for their inability or unwillingness to adapt to the norms of the receiving society (Saunders 2010; Bittner 2018; Nakamura and Witte 2018).

As the vast majority of immigrants to the U.S. and Europe settle in cities and suburbs, planners and designers must play a larger role in shaping the everyday experiences of immigrants and, in turn, shaping the broader landscape of immigration worldwide. In this chapter, I examine the role that the built environment, and public spaces more specifically, play in creating positive “contexts of reception,” or the combination of factors that shape how welcome immigrants feel in receiving communities (Portes and Rumbaut 2014). Scholars have long understood that neighborhoods play a powerful role in determining quality of life and social mobility, but few have unpacked the ways in which the immigrant experience is structured by the physical environment, in particular the streets, parks, squares, and other “sites of social infrastructure” that represent the quintessential stages for sociocultural activities (Mehta 2013; Chetty, Hendren, and Katz 2014; 2016; Klinenberg 2018).

Using the case of el Raval, a long-time immigrant arrival neighborhood in Barcelona’s Ciutat Vella (Old City), I conduct interviews, field research, and a document review to explore why immigrant integration tends to thrive in certain contexts over others, and what lessons planners and designers can learn from this rich and complex neighborhood. I ask not whether el Raval’s public spaces create positive contexts of reception on their own, but whether certain types and combinations of spaces might create the potential for the types of exchange and encounter that support immigrant integration (Talen 2006). I find that the neighborhood’s combination of both bridging and bonding spaces may contribute to its identity as a thriving arrival neighborhood (Putnam 2000; Németh, 2019). To that end,
planners and designers seeking to support immigrant integration should focus not only on creating diverse spaces of encounter that bridge difference but also more socially homogenous places where affinity groups can share concerns, claims, and interests.

**Living together in difference**

Immigrant integration is a dynamic, two-way process wherein both immigrants and the receiving society have responsibility to work together to build a cohesive community. Integration goes beyond border policies to focus on how immigrants are being incorporated within cities, suburbs, and regions, and specifically how societies foster improved economic mobility for, enhanced civic participation by, and openness to immigrants (Pastor et al. 2012).

Successful immigrant integration – one mutually developed and practiced – can enrich daily life and infuse receiving communities with new creativity and prosperity, increase empathy and understanding of the “Other,” and can prepare immigrants and host communities for life in a globalized future (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2015). Given that immigrant integration is a two-way street, the onus falls not only on immigrants to engage civically but also on the receiving society to create positive contexts of reception. In the context of significant socio-economic, cultural, racial, and ethnic diversification urban scholars and policymakers are once again debating whether to adopt either assimilationist or multiculturalist approaches to immigrant policy.

An assimilationist or “melting pot” approach asks newcomers to adopt the social, political, and cultural customs of the receiving society (Bloemraad, Korteweg, and Yurdakul 2008). Proponents believe that absorption into host communities can increase access to resources, capabilities, and rights that ultimately lead to health and quality of life benefits for immigrants and receiving societies alike (Popay et al. 2008). Nevertheless, critics claim that assimilationist approaches can force immigrants to abandon deeply held cultural practices and identities in order to conform to mainstream societal norms (Young 1990). Putnam (2007) showed that residents of the most diverse cities in fact tend to “hunker down” and interact less with their neighbors than those in more homogeneous settings. In addition, fears of racism, discrimination, and persecution can discourage immigrants from living in diverse areas in favor of co-ethnic enclaves that might “normalize the presence of [immigrants] and allow safe movement through the area” (Wessendorf 2019; Staeheli, Mitchell, and Nagel 2009, 638). Valentine (2008) challenges the idealization of diverse spaces of encounter, arguing instead that close proximity and forced interactions can in fact aggravate hostilities and increase stereotyping between diverse groups.

Multiculturalist approaches to immigration policy tend to support natural affinities toward group-based differentiation and clustering and the retention of immigrant cultural heritage, the deepening of in-group social ties, and the strengthening of political identities (Bader 2016; Young 2000; Bloemraad 2006). Tight-knit, homogeneous communities have proven more resilient when confronting disasters, shocks, and economic downturns (Klinenberg 2002; Rumbach, Makarewicz, and Németh 2016). May (2001) argues that group differentiation provides an opportunity for marginal groups like immigrants to clarify internal positions and dynamics and prepare themselves for the public realm with less fear of retribution or persecution. Nonetheless, critics argue that multiculturalism can breed isolation and discourage loyalty by immigrants to the receiving society (Bissoondath 1994). Isolation can foment extremism by those who feel distanced from mainstream society, such as in the Parisian banlieues (Packer 2015). The well-documented...
ills of racial and ethnic segregation include the development of what some call a spiral of deprivation or a “culture of poverty,” the continual decline in quality schools in economically-distressed areas, and a lack of social mobility for residents of low-income neighborhoods (Massey and Denton 1993; Coates 2014).

I argue that successful immigrant integration policy finds a middle ground between assimilation and isolation. Such policies should prioritize bridging social capital, or networks between socially heterogeneous groups, and bonding social capital, or connections within a more homogenous group or community (Putnam 2000). Instead, successful immigrant integration should support immigrants in retaining much of their cultural customs and ethnic heritage but also contributing to the societal whole. Iris Young (2000) calls this notion differentiated solidarity, a political and social ideal that describes, quite simply, how we might live together in difference. Differentiated solidarity is unique in affirming respectful engagement and mutual identification with diverse others and celebrating and encouraging group-based differentiation and residential clustering. Since all bridging and bonding actions require a stage, we now make the simple leap from the conceptual to the material public realm.

This is important because, to date, sociologists have almost entirely ignored the role the built environment plays in shaping the immigrant experience, and planners and designers have long overlooked how spatial structure might specifically play a role in immigrant integration, perhaps for fear of being considered environmental determinists (Talen 2006). Nevertheless, if we agree that poorly designed environments can “become a dumping ground for migrants, cut off from everything,” and that “the very shape of a neighborhood” can keep it out of contact with a receiving society, then it follows that that thoughtfully-designed neighborhoods can provide positive contexts of reception for immigrant integration (Saunders 2010, 290–292). But just what does such a spatial arrangement look like and how might it function? I turn to Barcelona’s el Raval to explore how public spaces might shape the immigrant experience.

**El Raval**

*El Raval* represents a site of exploration that, taken together with emerging scholarship, helps me to develop a conceptual understanding of how public spaces can impact immigrant integration. That the neighborhood has been able to grow and sustain its foreign-born population implies that certain aspects of the neighborhood might be welcoming to newcomers. It does not, however, imply that all immigrants there feel a sense of belonging or that all racial and ethnic groups in *el Raval* live in some paradisiacal solidarity. To make such claims, one must conduct in-depth surveys with old and new residents; in this study I rely solely on repeated personal observations, secondary data from published reports, and a handful of interviews with neighborhood residents.

In order to map key public spaces in the neighborhood, I conducted field observations over 13 months from 2015 to 2018. During these visits, which focused on observing street life and spatial patterns in *el Raval*, I took detailed field notes and hundreds of photographs and conducted informal interviews with residents and employees of local establishments, focusing particularly on how these people experienced changes to the social and physical fabric of the neighborhood since the early 1980s. I reviewed dozens of documents, plans, and peer-reviewed articles on the history of the neighborhood and conducted a spatial and socioeconomic analysis using data obtained from the municipality’s statistical clearinghouse (Ajuntament de Barcelona Department d’Estadística 2018).
El Raval is a dense warren of jumbled streets to which immigrants have flocked for centuries (Degen 2017). Since its beginnings as a site of agricultural production to its later role as the city’s industrial zone, the neighborhood has always been considered a marginal space (the Catalan word *raval* translates most closely to “suburb”). In the late 19th century, this working-class neighborhood was coined *Barri Xino* (Chinatown) by a journalist, a derogatory term referring to its renown for prostitution, drugs, and crime. Since the 1980s, the neighborhood has seen the influx of middle-class residents from around Spain and abroad, which some attribute to the municipality’s commitment to supporting new tourist infrastructure, such as cultural facilities and museums. Along with this commitment came the destruction of traditional hotspots for drug dealing and prostitution (Degen 2003) with parallel incentives provided to organic grocers and craft beer establishments, among others (Arbaci and Tapada-Berteli 2012).

Despite its prime location in one of the most popular travel destinations in the world, residents of el Raval remain “marginal” in a number of ways. The neighborhood’s RFD index, a measure of family income, is 75.8, compared to 100 for the rest of the city and to 108.5 for the adjacent *Barri Gotic* (Ajuntament de Barcelona Department d’Estadística 2018). The cadastral value is $70/square foot in el Raval compared to $84/square foot for the rest of the city, and only 23% of residents have a university education compared to 38% of *Barri Gotic* residents. At 174 residents/acre, el Raval may just be the densest neighborhood in Europe and approaches levels found only in Dhaka, the world’s densest city at 180 residents/acre (United Nations Human Settlement Programme 2017; Ajuntament de Barcelona Department d’Estadística 2018). A number of *seccions censals* (similar to US Census tracts) have densities in the 500+ residents/acre range.

Notably, 49% of the neighborhood’s 47,605 residents are foreign-born compared to only 17% of Barcelona residents (Ajuntament de Barcelona Department d’Estadística 2018). This number has increased dramatically since 1991, when only 4.8% of el Raval residents were born outside Spain. Now, residents of 125 nationalities live within an area just slightly larger than New York City’s Greenwich Village, a neighborhood that also houses four Christian churches, four mosques, three Hindu temples, and a Sikh *gurdwara* (Ajuntament de Barcelona Department d’Estadística 2018; Németh 2019).

The physical fabric of the neighborhood has changed remarkably in the past several decades as a result of plans that have coincided with major events in the city’s history, including the transition from Francoism to democracy and, most notably, the city’s hosting of the 1992 Olympics. Preparation for the Olympics helped catalyze significant improvements around the city, including connecting the seafront to the city, improving hundreds of public spaces, creating an Olympic Village, and introducing dozens of museums, stadia, and other public works on Montjuic. This set of interventions led by Heads of Planning Oriol Bohigas and Joan Busquets has been called “the Barcelona Model” and is the subject of both praise and scorn from urban scholars (Marshall 2004).

Some of the key projects include attempts in the 1990s and 2000s to increase light and air in the remarkably dense el Raval through a philosophy championed by Bohigas called *esponjamiento*, or a “hollowing out.” Figure 30.1 shows how these projects altered the urban fabric of el Raval. Fernández (2014) estimates that the *esponjamiento* displaced around 10,000 long-time residents of the neighborhood. Degen (2003) argues that the intent of these public space projects was to “civilize” the neighborhood by attracting well-heeled newcomers and tourists. But others argue that the *esponjamiento*’s goal of creating new bridging spaces in el Raval was somewhat successful in creating new places of encounter (Ortiz, García-Ramon, and Prats 2004; Subirats and Rius 2006). Indeed, these decades saw the development of three new bridging spaces in which, although not without conflict, people from all walks of life tend to congregate. Figure 30.2 includes all public spaces mentioned in the subsequent sections.
Bridging spaces

The first new space created was the Rambla del Raval, a large linear pedestrian space in the center of the neighborhood that required the controversial demolition of five blocks of residential properties in the 1990s (see Figure 30.3). Besides breaking up the dense labyrinth of streets in this part of the neighborhood, planners intended for this space to become a new focal point for el Raval similar to the city’s iconic Las Ramblas that bisects the Ciutat Vella. The space now hosts a number of annual festivals led by community organizations and cultural associations including the Festa Major del Raval (Horta 2010). During most days, the Rambla del Raval is populated by groups Moroccan and Pakistani men, the presence of which some claim tends to exclude non-immigrants and women; by night, however, the space consists of a mix of male and female tourists and groups of Catalan youth (Ortiz, Garcia-Ramon, and Prats 2004).

The second bridging space is the set of grand public squares around the Casa de Caritat complex, which includes the famous Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) and its Plaça dels Àngels, which attracts skateboarders from all over the world (see Figure 30.4). The space is populated throughout the day by a cacophony of regulars and tourists, from people experiencing homelessness to chess players to dog walkers to cycling kids (Degen 2017).

The third new bridging space is the Placa de Salvador Seguí, a space just blocks from the Rambla del Raval bounded on one side by the Filmoteca de Catalunya, an independent movie theater constructed in 2012, and on the other by Carrer d’en Robador, an infamous street long known as the center of prostitution and drug dealing in the city. In the center of the space, however, sits a well-used playground filled with neighborhood children and fronted by a bustling tapas bar. By day, the space often hosts flea markets and small festivals, and crowds come from all over the city. Police occupy the space both day and night, more as a means of protecting sex workers and keeping the peace than enforcing drug and prostitution laws (Fernández 2014).
In addition to these three newer bridging spaces, it is worth drawing attention to Carrer de Joaquín Costa, a long, vibrant, pedestrianized street filled day and night with activity (see Figure 30.5). The street is replete with hip bars and “third wave” coffee shops along with Italian pizza parlors, Turkish kebab houses, a Syrian tailor, Moroccan produce shops and carnisseries, Pakistani spice shops, Filipino salons, and Torrons Licors, one of the oldest continuously-operated, Catalan-run liquor stores in the city.

**Bonding spaces**

Complementing these spaces that intend to mix old and new residents are the dozens of community centers, places of worship, commercial clusters, community gardens, and other bonding spaces found throughout el Raval.

*Plaça del Pedro* and its surrounding streets house a cluster of Pakistani- and Moroccan-run fresh food shops. As of 2017, the small secció censal in which the space is located contains no
fewer than 35 stores selling “meat and pork,” “fruits and vegetables,” and “eggs and poultry” (Ajuntament de Barcelona Department d’Estadística 2018). Across the neighborhood, daytime beer drinkers—many long-time Raval residents—cluster in Plaça de Pere Coromines. Tourists and immigrants from Europe and the U.S. are the most frequent users of Plaça de Vicens Martorell, which contains a popular playground near Las Ramblas. In the university-adjacent part of the neighborhood, the Plaça de Castella is often full of boisterous Universitat de Barcelona students, and nearby Plaça de Terenci Moix is popular with Filipino teens playing full-court basketball games day and night. Within the larger bridging space of Plaça dels Àngels discussed earlier, clusters of skateboarders from around the world congregate, and while not skateboarding share cans of beer and porros (tobacco mixed with hashish) in the open air plaça.

In addition, a number of key bonding spaces are not outdoor plaças but are in fact what Amin (2002) calls “sites of banal transgression” such as recreation centers, libraries, shops, community centers, food markets, and day care centers. Berta Güell (2016) notes that 244 Pakistani-run businesses operate in the neighborhood, including 15 Pakistani-operated mobile phone stores along Carrer de Sant Pau alone. Commercial and residential density creates concentrations of activity and represents a key factor attracting immigrants to arrival neighborhoods as it creates positive contexts of reception for economic integration (Portes and Manning 1986). Business concentration is a distinctive feature of ethnic enclaves: a recent study of Pakistani workers in el Raval revealed that business clustering has created higher than average levels of social capital among this community due to the sharing of a co-ethnic workforce, among other factors (Ortiz, Garcia-Ramon, and Prats 2004).
Related, *el Raval* houses hundreds of community groups and neighborhood organizations. The Department d’Estadística (2018) now counts 95 officially-recognized organizations in the areas of “health and assistance,” “social services,” and “associations.” Subirats and Rius (2006) identified 571 cultural and arts-related businesses and over a dozen health centers, a number of *casals de barri* (neighborhood-based community centers), as well as three nursery schools, five primary schools, two secondary schools, and four libraries. The non-profit *Fundació Tot Raval* (2018) is an organization that itself brings together 68 community groups from the neighborhood, the majority of which are explicitly immigrant-serving.

**Fostering immigrant integration**

*El Raval* contains a number of bridging and bonding spaces interspersed throughout the neighborhood. It also includes one of the highest shares of foreign-born residents in the country; some attribute the neighborhood’s resistance to the wholesale gentrification facing the rest of the city to the presence of immigrants in such large numbers and the stigma that accompanies it (D. Saurí, personal communication, 4 June 2018).

One of the key goals of Bohigas’ *esponjamiento* was to open up the neighborhood physically and attract outsiders. Flagship public-space projects were relatively successful in doing so, even as they have been met with deep consternation due to the destruction of housing and devastating displacement of long-time residents, the majority of whom were poor or on fixed incomes. In his book *Matar al Chino*, Fernández (2014) argues that social ties were broken resulting in the death of *el Raval* as we know it. But rents have remained low, and immigration into the neighborhood skyrocketed during this time. I do not contend that these new public spaces *caused* this immigrant influx, but instead argue that they created key opportunities for co-presence and congregation across the diverse groups that have come to

![Figure 30.4 Plaça dels Àngels](Image credit: F. Schiami)
populate the neighborhood today. What is clear is that el Raval contains a rich mix of oldtimers and newcomers, and the physical spaces of the neighborhood seem to support that mix, providing opportunities for bridging due to the propinquity that I believe is a necessary, albeit insufficient, precondition to building solidarity across difference. One resident interviewed by Subirats and Rius (2006) claims: “Probably you have a lot more to do with your neighbor who’s Moroccan than with somebody from two streets over who is from Sant Gervasi [another Barcelona neighborhood] …” (43).

Nevertheless, just because diverse groups occupy the same space does not mean their interactions build trust, decrease stereotypes, or create lasting bonds that transcend contentious histories. In fact, many immigrants in el Raval lead parallel lives to native-born residents, rarely interacting but sometimes rubbing shoulders in the streets and sidewalks or in the workplace. A recent study of Pakistani women in el Raval partly attributes their high levels of life satisfaction to the dense concentration of immigrant-serving shops in the neighborhood (Valenzuela-Garcia, Parella, and Güell 2017). What is clear is that opportunities for bridging and bonding abound, and residents slip in and out of these spaces day and night. Yet just because immigrants live in el Raval does not mean their entire lives are experienced in the neighborhood itself; some work outside the neighborhood or regularly visit friends or family who live elsewhere.

Three key lessons emerge from this study of el Raval. First, scholars and practitioners alike must move beyond the either/or focus of assimilation vs. isolation toward a both/and approach that recognizes the importance of both iconic bridging spaces and everyday

Figure 30.5 Carrer de Joaquín Costa
Image credit: Sensaos
bonding spaces. Instead of focusing on individual spaces, planners and designers seeking to support immigrant integration should turn their focus to how series of public spaces can together shape the experiences and perceptions of users. Sociologists have long recognized the importance of ethnic enclaves and co-ethnic engagement for the recently-arrived immigrant, and this case study bears this out as immigrant groups in el Raval seem content to maintain a space of their own within their rapidly-changing neighborhood, sometimes long after their initial arrival.

Second, if we believe that place matters, then planners and designers must recognize the key role we play in the immigration debate and conduct detailed longitudinal research to understand how the built environment shapes actual perceptions of integration and belonging. Recent work by Eric Klinenberg (2018) has helped solidify the notion that material place and embodied social networks can foster sociocultural integration in an increasingly fragmented world. Whereas social interaction online is mediated and structured by algorithms and pre-established preferences, the material city is where we are forced to encounter and negotiate difference. Indeed, John Parkinson (2012) argues, “democracy [still] depends to a surprising extent on the availability of physical, public space, even in our allegedly digital world” (2).

Third, we must support policies that allow for the spatial arrangements known to foster immigrant integration. This is particularly important in the U.S., where immigration is becoming an increasingly suburban phenomenon. Hundreds of suburban communities – most of which were originally designed for middle-class, White, nuclear families – have become home to huge numbers of immigrants, who are in turn reshaping the physical and social fabric of their new communities. Local governments and service providers are often unprepared for the influx of new immigrant populations and the backlash that often ensues from long-time residents who feel their way of life is being threatened (Lung-Amam 2017). Proactive planners and designers should anticipate these transformations and take steps to address the concerns of long-time residents while creating positive contexts of reception for new arrivals.

This chapter is intended as an entry point into the relationship between immigration and public space in a thriving immigrant arrival neighborhood. It is now up to planning and design scholars and professionals to start playing a more powerful role at this critical juncture.

References


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