

INTRODUCTION

Barcelona was not an obvious candidate to become the “capital of the Mediterranean”. Until the advent of democracy in Spain in the late 1970s, Barcelona’s Catalan heritage had been suppressed and urban space planning had been neglected. Leaders were confronted by chronic industrial unemployment, a crumbling physical environment and endemic political instability. With these inauspicious conditions, Barcelona emerged as an urban role model of how to leverage a unique identity to achieve radical transformation

and a new urban economic model. A generation of visionary leaders used the city’s identity to bind its people and institutions around a clear and confident notion about their future identity in a changing global economy. The city’s distinctive character also helped build a unified proposition to sell its products and services globally. As a result, Barcelona has enjoyed two decades of sustained success: it is the sixth most visited city in Euro-African time zones, and has witnessed a phenomenal rise in cultural diversity.

In the immediate post-Franco era, Barcelona did not possess the clear political, economic or scale advantages to make a smooth or successful post-industrial transition. Although the city council had a sizeable tax base and symbolic power as capital of the Catalan region, the quest for metropolitan leadership was fragile, contested and never guaranteed. The city did benefit however, from **a generation of highly capable and visionary municipal and business leaders who, in tandem with an engaged civil society, kick-started the process of internationalization.**

This pattern began under Pasqual Maragall, the Mayor from 1982, under whose stewardship the city council’s administrative structure was overhauled. A more **productive relationship with the trade unions** was forged through his personal involvement. Maragall enabled a culture of social democratic leadership to emerge. Some key elements were: to deploy private capital to extract public utility, and to strengthen civil representation and embrace citizen-based pragmatism. With the help of experts in economics, society and culture, he spearheaded

the **use of design as an urban re-invention method.** In the first few years in office, Maragall brought about a shift from investment in large-scale road projects towards bespoke investments in central and suburban public space and architecture. He also began the municipal government’s active participation in urban symposia when creating the **first inter-mayoral dialogues.** This process has since **embedded shared urban learning into the DNA of Barcelona’s governance model.**

The award of the Olympics in 1986 accelerated investment into Barcelona’s built environment, communication platform, waterfront landscape and architecture, its logistics and air quality. The Olympics, which were a well-executed global media event, helped Barcelona to present an attractive and stylish image to the world. Along with critical infrastructure and place-making improvements, **the Olympic experience also set the pattern of collaboration among public and private stakeholders that remains pivotal to the city’s can-do ethos** – and which has proved successful in attracting international events, students and trade shows.

1986

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After the iconic Olympic fortnight in 1992, Barcelona’s leaders sought to capitalize on the exposure and to convert the city’s aesthetics and senses of exhilaration into private sector dynamism - and they did so with great success. In Barcelona, private business was invited to become much more actively involved in the cycle of public investment.

During the mayoral term of Joan Clos, Barcelona committed itself to a **framework of multi-lingual, business-friendliness, municipal openness and management rigor.** The previous decade of investments into art, design and sport provided much of the impetus for the city to grow its position as a regional gateway for entrepreneurs in new technological industries, aided by pioneering development agency Barcelona Activa.



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CONCLUSION

By the late 1990s Barcelona had become recognized internationally as an innovative and self-confident capital of media, arts, education and tourism. Its unified pitch to tourists, investors, residents, students, and institutions had been achieved through the careful integration of assets, ideas, values, culture and aspirations.

CREDITS AND LINKS

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Donald McNeill (2003), “Mapping the European Urban Left: The Barcelona Experience”, Antipode, Vol.35 (1), pp.74-94

Further information available at:

<http://www.brookings.edu/~l/media/Multimedia/Interactives/2013/tentraits/Barcelona.pdf>
<http://www.barcelonactiva.cat/barcelonactiva/en/all-about-barcelona-activa/who-we-are/>



BARCELONA



COORDINATES
41°23'N 2°11'E
AREA
310 sq mi
POPULATION
1,620,943
DENSITY
41,420/sq mi



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1-3. Barcelona, views of the city

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BARCELONA, Spain

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