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Residential Exclusion Mechanisms of Architectural Rehabilitation as an Urban Renewal Tool in the Old City of Barcelona

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Abstract

This paper examines architectural rehabilitation as a mechanism of residential exclusion within the broader framework of urban renewal in the Old City of Barcelona. It argues that rehabilitation, though often framed as preservation and improvement, functions as an instrument of neoliberal transformation that reorganizes social hierarchies while aestheticizing inequality. Drawing on the theories of Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, Michel Foucault, and Sharon Zukin, the study situates rehabilitation within the production of space as a field of power where architecture, governance, and capital converge. The transformation of Ciutat Vella, particularly in Raval, is analyzed as both material and symbolic: the renewal of buildings accompanies the displacement of working-class and migrant populations, while heritage becomes a tool of market valorization and cultural branding. The research exposes the contradictions of socially conscious rehabilitation, where participation and inclusion operate as ideological instruments that legitimize inequality through design and visual order. It concludes by calling for a re-politicization of architectural practice and urban renewal, reclaiming the right to the city as a collective capacity to inhabit and define space beyond capital and spectacle.

Keywords: architectural rehabilitation, urban renewal, Ciutat Vella, Raval

1. Introduction

Architectural rehabilitation occupies a complex position in the contemporary discourse of urban renewal. It is often celebrated as a form of urban repair that reactivates the life of the city through the restoration of its physical fabric and the preservation of its historical identity. Unlike the aggressive demolitions of mid-twentieth-century modernist planning, rehabilitation presents itself as a more humane and culturally sensitive approach. It implies care, continuity, and respect for collective memory. Yet behind this rhetoric of preservation lies a deeper transformation in how cities govern space, value, and social life. Architectural rehabilitation, particularly within historic urban cores, has become a strategic tool for the reinvention of urban identity in a global economy that prizes heritage, aesthetics, and lifestyle as sources of economic capital.

The Old City of Barcelona, or Ciutat Vella, exemplifies these contradictions with particular intensity. Its dense urban fabric, layered with centuries of history, has been a stage for multiple cycles of transformation that mirror broader

urban shifts across Europe. In the late twentieth century, as Barcelona sought to reposition itself within the global hierarchy of cities, the rehabilitation of Ciutat Vella became a key component of its development strategy. The project was framed as a moral and aesthetic imperative to recover the city's lost heart, to restore architectural dignity, and to bring life back to areas long associated with poverty and decay. Yet the process also introduced a new social order, one that prioritized cultural visibility and economic valorization over the right of residents to remain. In this sense, rehabilitation in Barcelona became less about conservation and more about conversion: the conversion of urban heritage into an instrument of market growth and symbolic power.

Ciutat Vella's transformation cannot be understood only as a series of architectural interventions but as a process of social restructuring. The restoration of façades, the redesign of public spaces, and the adaptive reuse of historic buildings were not neutral acts of improvement. They redefined the meanings of value and belonging within the city. As property values rose and new forms of cultural consumption emerged, long-standing communities—many of them working-class or immigrant—found themselves displaced by economic pressures and regulatory reforms that favored investment over habitation. The same cobblestone streets and restored balconies that now serve as icons of urban beauty mark the sites of exclusion and dispossession. Rehabilitation thus operates as both a visual and political project, one that reshapes the lived experience of the city while preserving the illusion of continuity.

The politics of rehabilitation in Barcelona reveal the entanglement of architecture, governance, and economy. Architectural practice, once associated primarily with material form, has become intertwined with urban management and social engineering. Through planning instruments such as the *Pla Especial de Reforma Interior* and broader programs of urban regeneration, the city government has employed architecture as a means of negotiating between preservation and profit. In this negotiation, the rhetoric of improvement masks a deeper logic of urban commodification. What appears as the recovery of urban life often serves as its reorganization around the demands of tourism, cultural branding, and global capital. The streets of El Raval or El Born, once marked by precarious living conditions, now perform the role of open-air museums, their authenticity carefully maintained as a marketable image.

To explore architectural rehabilitation as an urban renewal tool in the Old City of Barcelona is to interrogate the ways in which design and policy converge to produce exclusion. The process is not overtly violent, yet its effects are profound. Displacement occurs through the slow attrition of affordability, the redefinition of what counts as desirable habitation, and the transformation of everyday life into spectacle. Rehabilitation becomes a form of governance, shaping not only the physical environment but also the social possibilities of those who inhabit it. The aesthetic project of preservation conceals a disciplinary logic, one that manages populations through the regulation of space and the production of desire. In this way, the rehabilitated city becomes both a cultural artifact and a mechanism of control.

2. Theoretical Framework: Urban Renewal, Space, and Power

Urban renewal embodies the spatial articulation of social, political, and economic transformations. It is a field where architecture and governance converge to shape the lived experience of the city. In the contemporary era, the rhetoric of renewal is often framed in terms of sustainability, heritage preservation, and social improvement, but beneath these moral imperatives lies a deeper logic of power. Urban renewal, when examined critically, reveals how space becomes a medium of control, accumulation, and representation. Architecture, as both a physical and symbolic practice, participates in this process not as a neutral art but as a material expression of the social order. To understand the mechanisms through which architectural rehabilitation in the Old City of Barcelona operates, it is necessary to explore the theoretical relations among urban renewal, the production of space, and the exercise of power.

2.1 Urban Renewal and the Logic of Capital

The evolution of urban renewal is inseparable from the history of capitalist urbanization. The city has always served as both the stage and the instrument of capital accumulation. David Harvey identifies the urban process as a spatial fix that absorbs surplus capital during cycles of overaccumulation. When traditional avenues of profit become saturated, capital turns to the

built environment, investing in real estate, infrastructure, and spatial reconfiguration as means of renewing accumulation. Rehabilitation fits within this logic as an apparently benign form of reinvestment. It converts neglected spaces into profitable assets by attaching cultural and aesthetic value to them. The Old City of Barcelona offers a clear example of this transformation, where centuries-old buildings have been reimagined as commodities of heritage, attracting new capital flows under the guise of preservation. This process, which Harvey terms accumulation by dispossession, displaces earlier uses and users, converting lived neighborhoods into sites of speculative investment.

Neil Smith's theory of the rent gap provides an analytical tool for understanding the economic mechanics behind this phenomenon. The rent gap refers to the difference between the current rental income of a property and the potential rent that could be earned after reinvestment and redevelopment. In historically disinvested areas, the rent gap widens as the physical environment deteriorates and property values decline. When this gap reaches a profitable threshold, developers, aided by municipal policy, initiate renewal. Rehabilitation becomes the means of closing the rent gap by revalorizing space. In Ciutat Vella, once characterized by working-class housing and migrant communities, this revalorization has taken the form of architectural restoration and cultural repurposing. The transformation of modest apartment blocks into boutique hotels or short-term rentals illustrates how the rent gap is closed not through destruction but through aestheticization. The old is preserved, but its social meaning is rewritten.

The intersection of capital and culture in urban renewal has been explored by Sharon Zukin through her concept of the symbolic economy. For Zukin, the modern city derives much of its economic vitality from the commodification of culture, image, and identity. Urban renewal is no longer driven solely by industrial or infrastructural investment but by the production of symbolic value that can be marketed globally. Architectural rehabilitation becomes a strategy of image-making. By restoring historical façades and reorganizing urban spaces around leisure, art, and tourism, cities construct a brand that circulates through media and capital networks. The restored quarters of Barcelona are not only places of residence but also spectacles of authenticity, carefully curated for consumption. The power of architecture in this context lies in its capacity to generate and stabilize meaning, transforming material form into a sign of value. What appears as cultural preservation functions as economic differentiation, reinforcing hierarchies through taste and visibility.

2.2 The Production of Space and the Politics of Belonging

Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space offers a conceptual framework that situates these dynamics within a broader understanding of social relations. Lefebvre rejects the notion of space as a passive container, asserting instead that space is actively produced through the interaction of economic, political, and ideological forces. Every spatial configuration reflects the conditions of its production. The built environment embodies the dominant mode of production and serves to reproduce its social order. In this sense, rehabilitation is not a neutral act of repair but a reconfiguration of social relations. It reorganizes patterns of habitation, ownership, and visibility according to new regimes of value.

Lefebvre identifies three moments in the production of space: the perceived space of everyday practice, the conceived space of planning and representation, and the lived space of experience and imagination. Architectural rehabilitation operates primarily within the second moment, the space of representation. Planners and architects conceive of space as an object to be restructured according to functional and aesthetic principles. Yet these representations impose an abstract order on the lived reality of residents. In Ciutat Vella, the rehabilitation of streets, courtyards, and buildings imposed a vision of urban beauty and harmony that corresponded less to the needs of inhabitants than to the expectations of visitors and investors. The lived space of community and improvisation was replaced by a conceived space of regulation and display. Lefebvre's analysis reveals how this transformation is not merely visual but ontological. It redefines what it means to inhabit the city.

The right to the city, another of Lefebvre's key ideas, challenges the commodification of urban life that results from such transformations. The right to the city is not the right to access urban amenities but the right to participate in the

production of urban space. It is a collective right grounded in use rather than exchange value. Rehabilitation in Barcelona, while often justified as a public good, undermines this right by converting shared spaces into privatized experiences. The rhetoric of inclusion masks a process of exclusion, where only those who can afford the new forms of consumption are entitled to participate in the renewed city. The right to inhabit is replaced by the right to buy. The everyday life of residents becomes subordinated to the aesthetic and economic imperatives of global urbanism.

2.3 Architecture as an Instrument of Power

Michel Foucault's analysis of power provides another dimension to understanding how rehabilitation functions as a mechanism of governance. Foucault conceptualizes power not as a possession held by institutions but as a network of relations that operates through practices, discourses, and spatial arrangements. Space is one of the primary technologies through which power is exercised. The design of space structures visibility, movement, and behavior, shaping how subjects relate to one another and to authority. In this perspective, the rehabilitation of urban environments is a form of disciplinary architecture. The ordering of streets, the control of public lighting, and the regulation of façades produce an environment where conduct is normalized. The restored districts of Barcelona exemplify this logic. The reorganization of space into clean, well-lit, pedestrian-friendly zones facilitates surveillance and consumption while marginalizing informal uses and populations that do not fit the image of civic order.

The aesthetic harmony of rehabilitated architecture conceals a moral code. Cleanliness, uniformity, and visual coherence become expressions of social virtue. The spatial order of the restored city promotes an ethos of civility aligned with middle-class sensibilities. Disorder, whether physical or social, is framed as pathology. This spatial morality legitimizes exclusion. The removal of street vendors, the regulation of public gathering, and the displacement of low-income residents are justified in the name of safety and beauty. Foucault's notion of biopower illuminates how such interventions govern not only bodies but also the conditions of life itself. Urban renewal manages populations by regulating the environments in which they exist. The rehabilitated city becomes a space where aesthetics function as governance, and architecture becomes a medium through which citizenship is redefined.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and distinction deepens this understanding by linking taste and social hierarchy. Taste is not an individual preference but a social marker that differentiates classes. The rehabilitation of urban space embodies a specific aesthetic regime that aligns with the preferences of the middle and upper classes. The emphasis on authenticity, heritage, and minimalism expresses a cultivated taste that excludes other forms of expression associated with poverty or migration. The rehabilitated city materializes this distinction. Its architectural style and controlled atmosphere communicate refinement and exclusivity. The working-class and immigrant populations of Ciutat Vella become out of place not because of their income alone but because their presence disrupts the aesthetic order. Space becomes a field of symbolic violence where exclusion operates through culture as much as through economics.

2.4 Aesthetics, Ideology, and the Neoliberal City

The relationship between aesthetics and power in urban renewal reveals the ideological dimension of rehabilitation. Architecture participates in the construction of ideology by transforming economic and political relations into forms of appearance. The restored façade, the polished stone, and the carefully curated public square communicate a narrative of continuity and care. They present the city as a unified organism recovering from decay. Yet this visual coherence masks the fragmentation of social life beneath it. The ideological function of architecture lies in its ability to naturalize inequality. The beautification of space makes exclusion appear as progress. The poor are not expelled, they are rendered invisible through design.

The neoliberal city depends on this aesthetic consensus to sustain legitimacy. Urban policy increasingly deploys architecture and design as instruments of soft power, promoting images of inclusivity, creativity, and sustainability that align with the interests of global capital. The architectural profession becomes a partner in this process, providing the visual language through which neoliberal governance communicates itself. The rhetoric of

participation and innovation substitutes for genuine redistribution. In Barcelona, the so-called "Barcelona Model" exemplifies this dynamic. Architectural rehabilitation and urban design were celebrated as expressions of democratic renewal after the Franco dictatorship. Yet the very techniques that produced civic pride also facilitated gentrification and privatization. The image of urban quality became the vehicle for economic restructuring. The success of the model depended on its capacity to present exclusion as improvement.

The production of heritage illustrates how ideology operates through selective memory. Heritage is not an objective inheritance but a social construction that privileges certain histories over others. In the Old City of Barcelona, the rehabilitation process has elevated narratives of artistic creativity and Mediterranean cosmopolitanism while erasing the histories of labor, migration, and political struggle that once defined the district. The past is curated to fit the aesthetic and economic requirements of the present. This selective remembrance transforms collective memory into a commodity. The act of preservation becomes an act of reinvention, where what is remembered is determined by what can be sold. Heritage thus becomes a site of ideological production that legitimizes new forms of ownership and belonging.

Urban renewal also operates at the level of subjectivity. The rehabilitated city invites individuals to experience themselves as consumers of space. The pleasure of walking through restored streets and visiting curated markets produces a sense of participation in civic life. Yet this participation is mediated by consumption. The citizen is redefined as a customer whose engagement with the city is measured through spending and lifestyle. The displacement of long-term residents is rationalized as part of the process of modernization. The moral economy of renewal rewards those who conform to the new urban ethos of cleanliness, order, and productivity. The city becomes a pedagogical space that teaches subjects to internalize neoliberal values through their spatial practices.

Theoretical engagement with urban renewal, space, and power thus reveals architectural rehabilitation as a dense field of ideological and material production. It is not a peripheral aspect of urban policy but a central mechanism through which the neoliberal city organizes itself. In the case of Barcelona, the rehabilitation of Ciutat Vella expresses the convergence of economic rationality, aesthetic discourse, and political strategy. The result is a city that presents itself as inclusive and democratic while reproducing deep social inequalities through its spatial form. Urban renewal emerges as both a material and symbolic process that reshapes not only buildings and streets but also the meanings of citizenship, community, and belonging.

3. Contextualizing the Old City of Barcelona

The Old City of Barcelona, known as Ciutat Vella, is one of the most densely layered urban fabrics in Europe. Its physical and social morphology reflects centuries of coexistence between accumulation and decay, wealth and deprivation, cultural display and marginalization. The district contains the Gothic Quarter, El Raval, El Born, and Barceloneta, each of which embodies distinct phases in the city's historical evolution. These areas together form not only the geographic but also the symbolic heart of Barcelona, the place where the tension between preservation and transformation becomes most visible. To contextualize the mechanisms of exclusion that accompany architectural rehabilitation, it is necessary to trace the trajectory of urban policy, economic restructuring, and cultural production that have reshaped Ciutat Vella over the last century.

3.1 From Industrial Decline to Urban Symbol

By the middle of the twentieth century, Ciutat Vella had become the residue of an industrial city that had long shifted its productive base. The expansion of the Eixample district in the nineteenth century had drained economic vitality from the medieval core, leaving behind a landscape of overcrowded housing, decaying infrastructure, and marginalized labor. The end of the Franco dictatorship in the 1970s opened a new chapter in Barcelona's urban life, characterized by democratic optimism and a commitment to civic renewal. The city's political leadership began to imagine the urban fabric not only as a site of habitation but as a vehicle for expressing collective identity. The Old City, once stigmatized as a space of decline, was reinterpreted as a cultural resource whose architectural heritage could symbolize the rebirth of democracy.

The introduction of the 1976 *Pla General*

Metropolità (PGM) marked the beginning of a comprehensive urban strategy that sought to regulate growth and introduce spatial equity. Within this framework, the 1980s witnessed the formulation of the *Pla Especial de Reforma Interior* (PERI) for Ciutat Vella. This plan represented a decisive moment in Barcelona's shift toward rehabilitation as a form of renewal. The PERI aimed to preserve the historical character of the area while improving housing conditions and infrastructure. It targeted the restoration of façades, the opening of public spaces, and the renewal of utilities. The language of the plan was humanitarian and aesthetic, promising to restore dignity to the city's oldest quarter. Yet this dignity was tied to a specific vision of urban life that favored visibility, consumption, and order. The plan positioned architecture as the mediator between social reform and economic modernization.

The PERI was implemented during a period of intense transformation in European urban policy. Across the continent, cities were moving away from state-led welfare planning toward entrepreneurial governance. Local governments began to compete for investment and prestige by promoting culture, design, and heritage. Barcelona's political leadership, under the influence of urban theorists and architects, embraced this strategy with remarkable success. The Old City became the focal point of an urban narrative that linked physical rehabilitation with cultural vitality. Streets were repaved, façades were cleaned, and new cultural institutions were inserted into the historic fabric. The restoration of the Gothic Quarter served as a symbol of civic pride, while the transformation of El Raval became a laboratory for social experimentation. These interventions were presented as acts of social integration, yet they also laid the foundation for a new spatial economy based on tourism and real estate speculation.

3.2 The 1992 Olympics and the Consolidation of the Barcelona Model

The 1992 Olympic Games marked the moment when Barcelona's urban transformation achieved global recognition. The event catalyzed massive investment in infrastructure, public space, and architecture, projecting the city as a model of design-led regeneration. While much of the Olympic development occurred outside Ciutat Vella, the event's symbolic impact redefined the city's identity. Barcelona emerged as a brand synonymous with creativity, culture, and modernity. The Old City, with its narrow alleys and historical density, became the picturesque counterpoint to the new waterfront and Olympic Village. This duality reinforced a powerful image of the city as both ancient and innovative. The cultural and visual capital generated by this image attracted global tourism and speculative capital. The Old City was recast as a space of consumption, where history itself could be purchased and experienced.

The success of the Barcelona Model rested on its capacity to align aesthetic renewal with political consensus. The city's leadership articulated urban design as a form of democratic expression, a means of restoring public life and civic identity. This rhetoric concealed the economic restructuring that accompanied renewal. The modernization of infrastructure and the beautification of public spaces raised property values and redefined the social composition of the center. Middle-class residents and cultural institutions replaced the working-class and migrant populations that had long occupied the area. The expansion of the service economy and the liberalization of real estate markets in the 1990s accelerated this process. The architecture of rehabilitation thus became an instrument of social differentiation. The same cobblestone streets that symbolized inclusivity and openness became the threshold of exclusion.

The transformation of El Raval epitomizes these contradictions. Once known for its dense tenements and marginal economies, El Raval was subjected to a comprehensive rehabilitation program that combined housing renewal with cultural investment. The construction of the Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona (MACBA) in 1995 and the adjacent Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona (CCCB) signaled a shift in the area's identity from working-class district to cultural enclave. The insertion of these institutions introduced a new spatial and social order. Streets were widened, buildings demolished, and public spaces redesigned to accommodate the anticipated influx of visitors. The presence of modern architecture within the historical fabric became a statement of progress. Yet the social effects were profound. Many long-term residents were displaced through rent increases, eviction, and the conversion of housing into tourist accommodation. The cultural regeneration of El Raval, celebrated internationally as a model of

integration, produced a geography of separation within the neighborhood itself.

3.3 Tourism, Heritage, and the Politics of Visibility

By the early twenty-first century, Ciutat Vella had become a stage for the global tourist economy. The restoration of the Gothic Quarter and the waterfront transformed these spaces into open-air museums. The aesthetic of authenticity that once served as a means of civic recovery became a marketing tool. Heritage was redefined as spectacle. The growth of tourism generated employment and revenue, yet it also deepened social polarization. Local shops gave way to souvenir stores, and housing stock was converted into short-term rentals. The experience of living in Ciutat Vella was replaced by the experience of visiting it. Architecture, once an instrument of habitation, became a medium of consumption.

The politics of visibility underlie this transformation. Rehabilitation produces a specific visual order that privileges what can be seen and celebrated while obscuring what must be hidden. The restored façades of the Gothic Quarter present an image of timeless continuity, while the social struggles of residents remain invisible behind them. The control of appearance becomes a form of control over reality. Public spaces are designed to facilitate circulation and spectacle rather than encounter and use. The aesthetic coherence of the city center corresponds to an economic coherence that privileges capital over community. The displacement of residents and the commodification of culture are naturalized through the visual language of order and beauty.

The city's governance structure has played a decisive role in sustaining this visual and economic regime. Municipal policies have continued to promote rehabilitation as a central strategy of development, often coupling heritage preservation with economic diversification. The emergence of creative industries and tourism as leading sectors has reinforced the dependency of Ciutat Vella on symbolic capital. The regulatory framework has supported this orientation by facilitating property renovation and liberalizing short-term rentals. The *Pla d'Usos* introduced to regulate commercial and tourist activities has repeatedly been revised under pressure from competing interests. While community organizations have mobilized against touristification and displacement, their capacity to influence policy remains limited. The spatial logic of the city continues to reflect the priorities of global visibility and investment.

3.4 Contradictions of the Contemporary Urban Condition

The case of the Old City of Barcelona illustrates the contradictions inherent in neoliberal urbanism. Rehabilitation projects framed as instruments of social inclusion produce exclusion through the mechanisms of marketization. The city's architectural beauty conceals its social fragility. The streets of Ciutat Vella embody both the triumph of design and the tragedy of displacement. The coexistence of restored monuments and precarious living conditions within the same urban fabric exposes the tension between aesthetic and social values. The logic of capital accumulation requires continuous reinvention of the city's image, and this reinvention depends on the appropriation of collective history. The production of heritage becomes inseparable from the production of inequality.

The symbolic power of Barcelona's urban transformation extends beyond its physical boundaries. The city has been widely studied and emulated as a model of sustainable and participatory renewal. Yet the experience of Ciutat Vella reveals the limitations of this model. The promise of participation has often been reduced to consultation without redistribution. Residents are invited to contribute to the image of inclusion while remaining excluded from decision-making. The success of the Barcelona Model lies in its ability to transform political conflict into aesthetic harmony. This harmony is maintained through the regulation of space and the depoliticization of urban life. The rehabilitated city presents itself as open and democratic, but its openness is conditioned by economic access.

The transformation of Ciutat Vella must therefore be understood not only as an architectural or economic phenomenon but as a cultural and ideological project. The narrative of rehabilitation constructs a moral geography where renewal is equated with virtue and resistance with backwardness. The displacement of residents is justified as a necessary step in the process of modernization. The global admiration for Barcelona's urban design conceals the local struggles that sustain it. The city becomes an

object of desire for outsiders while becoming increasingly inaccessible to its own inhabitants. This paradox captures the essence of the neoliberal urban condition, where the right to the city is transformed into the privilege of spectacle.

The contextualization of the Old City of Barcelona reveals that architectural rehabilitation is a profoundly ambivalent process. It preserves material heritage while erasing social memory. It creates spaces of beauty and visibility while displacing those who once gave these spaces life. The tension between these outcomes defines the contemporary urban condition. In the polished stone of restored façades, one can read both the promise of the democratic city and the persistence of inequality. Barcelona's experience demonstrates that the politics of urban renewal cannot be separated from the politics of power. The rehabilitation of Ciutat Vella stands as both a monument to the city's ingenuity and a mirror of its contradictions, a living archive of how the pursuit of urban beauty continues to reproduce social exclusion in the name of progress.

4. Mechanisms of Residential Exclusion in Architectural Rehabilitation

The rehabilitation of the Old City of Barcelona represents a form of urban renewal that articulates exclusion through spatial, economic, and cultural means. The mechanisms by which residents are displaced are not always explicit. They often operate within frameworks of legality and aesthetics that disguise the processes of dispossession as improvements in quality of life, heritage protection, or modernization. To understand how exclusion unfolds through rehabilitation, one must analyze its multiple dimensions. Economic mechanisms transform the housing market, regulatory frameworks shape who has access to space, and symbolic reconfigurations redefine belonging and identity. These mechanisms intertwine to produce a landscape of exclusion that is both material and perceptual, turning the Old City into a field of controlled transformation where displacement appears natural and inevitable.

4.1 Economic Mechanisms

The economic mechanisms of exclusion are rooted in the transformation of space into a financial asset. Rehabilitation raises the exchange value of property by converting age and decay into qualities of distinction and authenticity. Once a building or street undergoes restoration, its perceived value in the market increases dramatically. This revaluation often exceeds the capacity of long-term residents to remain in their homes. Rent inflation follows as landlords exploit new market conditions. The process is gradual yet relentless. As investment enters the area, the cost of living rises, services shift toward higher-income consumers, and local businesses are replaced by enterprises catering to tourists or new residents. The fabric of everyday life dissolves under the pressure of speculative interest.

Real estate speculation becomes the driving force behind this transformation. Investors purchase buildings not to inhabit them but to extract value through renovation and resale. The physical restoration of architecture becomes an instrument of financial accumulation. In Ciutat Vella, this speculative cycle has been facilitated by policies that prioritize property improvement without imposing restrictions on affordability. The gap between the market price of rehabilitated housing and the incomes of existing residents widens with each intervention. Eviction often takes the form of attrition. Tenants are pressured through rent hikes, legal ambiguities, or the physical degradation of their living conditions prior to renovation. The law allows property owners to terminate long-term leases when buildings undergo restoration, framing displacement as a technical requirement of improvement.

The rise of the short-term rental market has intensified these dynamics. Platforms such as Airbnb have redefined housing as a source of flexible profit rather than stable shelter. The architecture of the rehabilitated city lends itself perfectly to this transformation. Restored apartments with exposed brick walls, timber beams, and traditional balconies become highly desirable commodities for tourists seeking authentic experiences. The aesthetic of heritage is converted into a marketing device. Each restored façade, while contributing to the collective beauty of the city, also functions as a visual advertisement for temporary consumption. The economic logic of tourism thus integrates seamlessly with the logic of real estate speculation. What was once a neighborhood of residents becomes a landscape of transient occupation. The circulation of capital replaces the continuity of community.

This process exemplifies the broader shift toward platform capitalism, where digital infrastructures mediate access to space. The proliferation of tourist rentals accelerates the expulsion of permanent residents, as landlords find higher returns in short-term leases. Municipal efforts to regulate these practices have struggled against the scale of demand and the power of property lobbies. The outcome is a spatial economy oriented toward visitors rather than inhabitants. Housing ceases to function as a social right and becomes an investment vehicle. The economic exclusion generated by rehabilitation thus operates through the redefinition of the city's core function. The Old City, once the center of collective life, becomes the center of capital circulation.

4.2 Regulatory and Institutional Mechanisms

Regulatory frameworks play a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of rehabilitation. Urban policies often present themselves as neutral instruments of management, yet they embed ideological choices about who and what the city is for. In Barcelona, the *Pla Especial de Reforma Interior* and subsequent plans have combined conservation goals with market-oriented strategies. These plans define heritage protection as a technical objective, yet they frequently align with private investment interests. By facilitating permits for renovation and easing restrictions on property transactions, they create conditions for capital influx while neglecting social safeguards. The discourse of heritage preservation legitimizes intervention, but the absence of social protections translates preservation into exclusion. The right to remain is not protected by the same enthusiasm that protects the architectural form.

The relationship between policy and displacement is often mediated through the language of modernization. Regulations that impose higher standards for habitability and safety may seem progressive, but they can also function as instruments of exclusion. When compliance with new standards becomes a prerequisite for residence, those unable to afford the necessary upgrades are forced to leave. This process is evident in Ciutat Vella, where older rental buildings were subjected to renovation requirements that owners passed on to tenants through rent increases or eviction. The legal apparatus thus transforms social inequality into technical necessity. The state appears as a neutral arbiter of quality, but in practice, it enforces a regime of spatial purification that favors investment over continuity.

Institutional mechanisms also extend to the organization of public space. Rehabilitation projects often redefine streets, plazas, and courtyards to accommodate the flow of tourists and consumers. The design of these spaces privileges visibility, safety, and cleanliness, creating an environment conducive to commerce and spectacle. The public realm becomes an extension of the market, regulated through design and surveillance. In Ciutat Vella, the creation of new pedestrian zones and the redesign of squares such as Plaça dels Àngels have reshaped social behavior. Spaces that once served as meeting points for residents have become performance stages for the tourist economy. Informal uses are restricted or prohibited, and the presence of marginalized groups is policed. The city's regulatory framework enforces a spatial order that excludes those who do not conform to the aesthetic or economic norms of the rehabilitated environment.

This privatization of public space is not limited to ownership but extends to its very conception. The idea of publicness is redefined to mean accessibility under conditions of consumption. The visual harmony of urban design conceals the exclusionary practices that maintain it. Surveillance, both technological and architectural, ensures compliance with the norms of behavior expected in the new city. Benches are designed to discourage rest, lighting eliminates shadows, and signage guides movement. These subtle elements of design operate as mechanisms of social control. The rehabilitated city thus achieves order not through coercion but through the quiet regulation of possibility. Public space becomes a managed environment where freedom is permitted only within predefined limits.

4.3 Symbolic and Cultural Mechanisms

Exclusion in the rehabilitated city also unfolds through symbolic and cultural mechanisms that operate at the level of representation and meaning. Rehabilitation transforms not only the physical appearance of space but also its identity. The Old City has been rebranded as a site of creativity, authenticity, and cosmopolitan culture. This rebranding replaces older narratives of working-class solidarity and migrant presence with new stories of innovation

and artistic vitality. The process can be understood as cultural requalification, a form of symbolic cleansing that removes the traces of social struggle and replaces them with sanitized images of urban life. The city's heritage becomes a stage for curated diversity that excludes the messy realities of coexistence.

Sharon Zukin's idea of the aesthetic of authenticity captures this transformation. Authenticity, once associated with the lived experience of residents, becomes a manufactured quality that can be sold. Architectural rehabilitation plays a central role in producing this illusion. The restoration of façades, the revival of traditional materials, and the preservation of historical details create a sense of continuity that masks rupture. The image of the old city becomes a commodity in itself. Cultural events, art galleries, and boutique stores appropriate the symbolism of local tradition while erasing its social roots. Residents are displaced not only physically but also symbolically, as their histories and practices are reinterpreted within the logic of consumption.

This process culminates in what can be described as the museification of everyday life. The city becomes a museum where history is preserved as spectacle and lived experience is subordinated to visual pleasure. The restored streets of El Born and the Gothic Quarter are curated like exhibits, their authenticity carefully maintained through design and policy. The result is a paradox of vitality and emptiness. The physical form of the neighborhood is preserved, but the social life that once animated it is diminished. The everyday practices of residents are replaced by the rhythms of tourism. Walking, shopping, and photographing become the dominant activities. The city performs itself for an audience, and in doing so, it loses the spontaneity that once defined it.

The cultural mechanisms of exclusion thus operate through desire. They create an image of the city that people want to inhabit, visit, and consume, yet this desire depends on the removal of those who do not fit the image. The authenticity that attracts new users is built upon the erasure of the authentic life that preceded it. The Old City becomes an idealized version of itself, a place where history has been smoothed into narrative and difference into design. The inhabitants who remain are compelled to adapt their behavior, aesthetics, and social practices to align with the expectations of the rehabilitated environment. Exclusion here is not only a matter of displacement but of transformation. The right to belong becomes conditional upon conformity to the new cultural codes of urban life.

The mechanisms of residential exclusion in architectural rehabilitation thus reveal the multifaceted nature of urban transformation. Economic forces, regulatory frameworks, and cultural narratives converge to produce a city that is at once beautiful and exclusionary. The Old City of Barcelona illustrates how the promise of preservation can mask the practice of dispossession. Rehabilitation becomes a process of reclassifying space, redefining value, and remapping belonging. The result is a city that appears unified yet is deeply divided, a landscape of restored buildings and displaced lives that embodies the contradictions of contemporary urbanism.

5. The Aestheticization of Inequality: Architecture as Urban Ideology

The aestheticization of inequality describes a condition in which social hierarchies and exclusions are disguised beneath the language of beauty, heritage, and urban improvement. In the Old City of Barcelona, architectural rehabilitation embodies this phenomenon with striking clarity. The transformation of space is not merely an act of material renewal but a cultural and ideological operation. Architecture becomes the medium through which inequality is rendered visible as order, exclusion is reinterpreted as refinement, and displacement is narrated as progress. The city presents its own contradictions as achievements, turning the experience of urban inequality into a spectacle of design and preservation. This process reveals how architecture participates in the ideological production of urban reality, shaping both perception and experience.

The aesthetic project of rehabilitation constructs a visual coherence that masks the dissonance of social life. Restored façades, uniform paving stones, and regulated public lighting create an image of harmony and continuity. This image operates as a form of persuasion. It invites the observer to believe that the city has been healed, that the decay of the past has given way to a new era of civility and prosperity. Yet beneath the surface lies the fragmentation of the urban body. The aesthetic order of space conceals the disorder of displacement. Those who can no longer afford to live in the rehabilitated

neighborhoods are removed from sight, their absence incorporated into the visual calm of the new cityscape. Architecture thus functions as a visual ideology that transforms inequality into a landscape of beauty. The viewer perceives not exclusion but elegance, not loss but achievement.

This visual ideology operates through the power of representation. The city is reimagined as an image of itself, a carefully curated composition that aligns with the expectations of global spectatorship. Photography, film, and tourism reinforce this image by circulating the same scenes of restored streets and vibrant public life. The repetition of these images produces a collective perception of authenticity that obscures the structural violence of renewal. The aesthetic experience of the city becomes detached from the social conditions that sustain it. Visitors encounter the city as an object of appreciation rather than as a living habitat. The act of seeing replaces the act of inhabiting. In this transformation, architecture serves as both stage and actor, performing the narrative of the city's rebirth while concealing the costs of its performance.

The ideological function of architecture lies in its ability to naturalize the outcomes of political and economic decisions. When urban renewal produces inequality, architecture offers a language of justification. The restored building symbolizes care for heritage, the new plaza stands for openness, and the clean streets signify safety. Each of these qualities carries moral connotations that validate the underlying processes of exclusion. The aesthetics of order become the ethics of progress. The city that looks good must also be good. In this way, architecture participates in what Antonio Gramsci described as hegemony, the process through which power maintains consent by shaping cultural and moral values. The aestheticization of space becomes a form of consensus-building that makes the unequal city appear legitimate and desirable.

This transformation of inequality into aesthetic pleasure can be observed in the spatial practices of everyday life in Ciutat Vella. Public spaces that once served as sites of interaction among diverse populations are now choreographed for visual consumption. The behavior of bodies in these spaces conforms to the logic of display. Cafés spill onto pedestrian streets with uniform furniture and controlled lighting, transforming daily life into an urban tableau. The visual coherence of the space demands social coherence. Activities that disrupt the aesthetic order, such as informal commerce, street art, or public assembly, are marginalized or prohibited. The experience of beauty thus entails the regulation of difference. The aestheticization of inequality functions not only through images but through embodied practices that discipline how people move, gather, and relate.

The connection between architecture and ideology also operates at the level of memory. Rehabilitation claims to preserve history, but what it preserves is a selective version of the past. The restored Gothic arches and Baroque façades of Barcelona's Old City evoke a narrative of timeless identity, yet they omit the histories of labor, migration, and resistance that once defined these spaces. The visual coherence of heritage depends on the erasure of conflict. Architecture becomes a medium of historical editing, producing a purified past that supports the city's contemporary self-image. This selective memory aligns with the requirements of the tourist economy, which seeks a past that is picturesque but not political. The aestheticization of history thus transforms memory into commodity. Visitors consume the illusion of continuity, unaware that the act of preservation has already altered what is being preserved.

The ideological nature of architecture becomes most evident when beauty is mobilized as a defense against critique. The claim that a space is beautiful disarms discussion about its social consequences. A rehabilitated street or building is presented as evidence of collective success, rendering questions of displacement or inequality inappropriate or even ungrateful. The aesthetic value of the city becomes a moral value that overrides concerns about justice. This dynamic exemplifies what Walter Benjamin identified as the aestheticization of politics, in which the visual experience of progress substitutes for its material realization. The city is transformed into a work of art, admired for its form rather than interrogated for its function. The citizen becomes a spectator, and the act of seeing replaces the act of participating.

The aestheticization of inequality is not an accidental byproduct of urban renewal but a structural feature of neoliberal urbanism. The contemporary city depends on its capacity to produce images of quality, sustainability, and

inclusivity that attract investment and tourism. Architecture provides the language for these images. The material improvements associated with rehabilitation, new pavements, restored façades, green spaces, serve as visible indicators of success in global competition. Yet these same improvements often coincide with the displacement of vulnerable populations and the privatization of public life. The contradiction between social loss and aesthetic gain is resolved through the narrative of beauty. The polished surfaces of the rehabilitated city function as a screen upon which the ideals of progress are projected. Behind this screen, the city reorganizes itself around the imperatives of profit and prestige.

The ideological power of architecture is reinforced by its sensory immediacy. Unlike policy or law, architecture communicates through perception. It appeals directly to sight, touch, and movement, producing emotions that shape understanding. The pleasure of walking through a well-designed street can obscure the awareness of exclusion. The body experiences comfort, harmony, and safety, translating these sensations into judgments of moral and social order. The beauty of the rehabilitated city thus becomes an affective justification for inequality. The experience of aesthetic satisfaction produces consent without the need for argument. The city governs through atmosphere. This sensory dimension of ideology is one of architecture's most powerful yet least visible capacities.

In the Old City of Barcelona, the aestheticization of inequality reaches a paradoxical climax. The same architectural forms that attract admiration from around the world also mark the boundaries of belonging. The restored squares and streets that appear as symbols of collective achievement are, for many former residents, monuments to loss. The architectural language of inclusion, expressed through open spaces and transparent façades, conceals a social reality of exclusion. The beauty of the city becomes inseparable from its injustice. The gaze of the visitor replaces the voice of the inhabitant. The aesthetic project of renewal transforms the city into a mirror in which it admires itself, unable to see the absences that make its reflection possible.

The aestheticization of inequality thus represents the culmination of the ideological function of architecture within urban rehabilitation. By translating economic and political processes into visual and sensory experiences, architecture transforms conflict into composition and displacement into design. The rehabilitated city does not deny inequality, it aestheticizes it, rendering it visible as part of the city's charm. The tension between poverty and prosperity becomes a spectacle for contemplation rather than a problem for resolution. In this way, architecture sustains the neoliberal city's most enduring illusion: that beauty and justice can coexist without contradiction.

6. Raval as a Case of Urban Contradiction

El Raval occupies a central position in the contemporary urban narrative of Barcelona. It has long stood as both a physical and symbolic core of the city's complexity, a space where diverse social worlds coexist within a dense historical fabric. Its proximity to the Rambla and the Gothic Quarter has always made it both integral and marginal to the city's identity. The district has been a place of labor, migration, and cultural exchange, but also of poverty, stigmatization, and neglect. The process of architectural rehabilitation that began in the late twentieth century turned Raval into the primary testing ground for Barcelona's model of urban renewal. It is here that the contradictions of regeneration, between inclusion and exclusion, democratization and displacement, become most visible. The transformation of Raval into a space of culture and consumption has produced a layered urban condition in which aesthetic and social forces coexist uneasily.

The Raval that existed before the implementation of major rehabilitation programs was a district defined by density and informality. Its narrow streets and decaying housing stock accommodated successive waves of migrants from other parts of Spain and, later, from across the world. The neighborhood's physical deterioration reflected decades of neglect under industrial decline and authoritarian urban policy. Yet Raval also sustained a vibrant social ecology built on networks of solidarity, mutual aid, and cultural diversity. Its marginality was productive as much as it was stigmatized. When the democratic city government in the 1980s began to envision a new identity for Barcelona, Raval was identified as both a problem to be solved and an opportunity to demonstrate civic progress. Rehabilitation promised to erase the stigma of degradation and to reintegrate the

district into the urban imaginary of the city. The goal, articulated in planning documents and public discourse, was to transform Raval from a space of exclusion into a space of participation.

The implementation of the *Pla Especial de Reforma Interior del Raval* was central to this transformation. It introduced an extensive program of physical renewal: the demolition of derelict structures, the widening of streets, and the creation of new public spaces. The rhetoric of the plan emphasized social improvement and quality of life, yet the economic logic behind it aligned with the city's broader strategy of positioning itself within global networks of tourism and cultural capital. Architecture played a pivotal role in this strategy. The construction of the Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona (MACBA), designed by Richard Meier and inaugurated in 1995, marked a turning point. Its gleaming white surfaces and open plaza introduced a new spatial order into the dense medieval fabric. The museum, together with the adjacent Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona (CCCB), established a cultural axis intended to rebrand Raval as a hub of creativity and cosmopolitanism. These institutions were meant to symbolize inclusion through access to art and public space, yet their insertion into the neighborhood initiated a process of profound socio-spatial reclassification.

The introduction of the MACBA and CCCB redefined the neighborhood's visual and symbolic identity. The contrast between Meier's modernist architecture and the surrounding historical buildings was striking. The museum's openness and luminosity were presented as metaphors for transparency and renewal, embodying the democratic values of post-Franco Spain. Yet this architectural language also imposed a new hierarchy of visibility. The plaza that extends before the museum, designed as a public gathering space, became a field of negotiation between different urban constituencies. Tourists, art students, skateboarders, and local residents inhabited it in divergent ways. The museum projected cultural sophistication, but the everyday life of the plaza revealed the tensions between global image-making and local survival. The visual clarity of the architecture concealed the complexity of the social fabric it displaced. The museum's clean geometry stood in contrast to the informal networks of exchange and support that characterized the pre-rehabilitation Raval.

The presence of these institutions catalyzed economic change. Property values in the surrounding area began to rise, attracting investors and middle-class newcomers. Cafés, galleries, and boutique shops followed, creating a new urban aesthetic aligned with global trends in creative cities. The transformation of Raval thus mirrored broader processes of gentrification observed in cities such as London, Berlin, and New York. Yet in Barcelona, this process acquired a specific cultural legitimacy. The city's leadership presented the renewal of Raval as evidence of its commitment to cultural democratization. The museum and cultural center were portrayed as spaces of accessibility and public engagement. Art and design were mobilized as instruments of social integration. This narrative masked the displacement that accompanied the transformation. As rents increased and housing stock was converted to tourist accommodation, long-term residents, many of whom were immigrants or elderly working-class tenants, found themselves excluded from the neighborhood that had once provided them refuge.

The contradiction between architecture as democratization and architecture as exclusion lies at the heart of Raval's transformation. The same spaces that symbolize openness and inclusion also enact subtle forms of segregation. The plaza before the MACBA, often filled with young skateboarders, photographers, and tourists, embodies this ambivalence. It is a space of vitality and exchange, yet its accessibility is uneven. Local residents often experience it as a site of intrusion, a place where their neighborhood is appropriated by outsiders. The cultural capital generated by the museum and CCCB circulates globally, while the social capital of the original community diminishes locally. The aesthetics of modernity and creativity operate as mechanisms of displacement, producing a new form of inequality grounded in culture rather than income alone. Architecture, by shaping visibility and access, mediates these inequalities in tangible form.

The process of transformation extends beyond the economic and architectural to the realm of meaning. The symbolic requalification of Raval has replaced its identity as a working-class and migrant neighborhood with a narrative of cosmopolitan creativity. The district is now promoted as diverse and multicultural, but this diversity is curated. It exists as spectacle rather

than as lived condition. Local festivals, street art, and culinary traditions are reinterpreted through the lens of tourism and consumption. The representation of diversity serves to legitimize the new urban order, presenting the neighborhood as inclusive even as it becomes socially homogenized. The lived experience of cultural exchange gives way to a commodified multiculturalism that celebrates difference while neutralizing its political potential. The rhetoric of inclusion thus operates as an aesthetic of control.

The transformation of housing conditions in Raval illustrates how this symbolic redefinition translates into material displacement. The introduction of rehabilitation subsidies and tax incentives for restoration encouraged property owners to renovate buildings, but these measures rarely benefited tenants. Instead, they facilitated rent increases and speculative sales. The neighborhood's physical improvement became inseparable from its social cleansing. Many of the former residents relocated to peripheral districts, while the remaining population adapted to the pressures of an increasingly commodified housing market. The result is a hybrid landscape where luxury apartments coexist with deteriorating tenements, and where poverty persists in the shadows of architectural success. This juxtaposition reinforces the visual narrative of contrast that defines Raval's appeal. The coexistence of old and new, poor and rich, is not accidental, it is part of the aesthetic of urban contradiction that the city markets as authenticity.

Raval thus functions as a microcosm of the neoliberal city, where architecture mediates between cultural aspiration and economic exclusion. The rehabilitation of the district achieved undeniable improvements in infrastructure and visibility, yet these achievements came at the cost of social displacement and erasure. The neighborhood's transformation reveals how the rhetoric of cultural democratization can coexist with practices of exclusion. The museum that invites public participation also establishes new boundaries of belonging. The plaza that appears open to all regulates behavior through subtle codes of aesthetics and conduct. The discourse of diversity conceals the uniformity of economic interest. Raval's contradictions are not anomalies but expressions of the logic of urban renewal itself. They show how architecture operates simultaneously as a tool of emancipation and domination, capable of producing both access and alienation.

In the present moment, Raval remains a contested space. Activist groups, community organizations, and cultural collectives continue to challenge the displacement that rehabilitation has produced. Their resistance manifests in local art projects, housing cooperatives, and neighborhood assemblies that reclaim public spaces for community use. These efforts testify to the resilience of social life in the face of structural transformation. They also expose the limits of architecture as an instrument of justice. The physical renewal of the city cannot substitute for the social renewal that inclusion demands. Raval's ongoing tension between its global image and local reality encapsulates the broader dilemma of urban modernization in Barcelona: how to reconcile beauty with equity, progress with memory, and visibility with belonging.

The contradictions embodied in Raval reveal the double nature of architectural rehabilitation. It is both an aesthetic project that produces spaces of cultural prestige and a political project that reorganizes the social geography of the city. The district stands as a living document of how architecture can articulate the promises and failures of urban democracy. In its streets and plazas, the ideals of openness and creativity coexist with the realities of exclusion and displacement. The transformation of Raval is not only a local event but a paradigm for understanding the global city's struggle between spectacle and substance. Its contradictions endure because they are structural, not incidental, to the way contemporary urbanism operates. Raval's story is therefore not one of simple loss or gain but of the continuous negotiation between power and community, image and experience, architecture and life.

7. The Limits and Paradoxes of "Socially Conscious" Rehabilitation

The concept of social inclusion has become one of the most recurrent and celebrated principles in contemporary urban discourse. It is invoked by planners, architects, and policymakers as a moral justification for renewal projects and as a safeguard against the excesses of neoliberal development. In the context of Barcelona, social inclusion has been central to the rhetoric

surrounding urban rehabilitation since the 1980s. The city's global reputation as a laboratory of participatory and socially conscious planning has rested on the promise that architectural and spatial interventions can reconcile economic growth with social justice. Yet this promise conceals a profound contradiction. Inclusion is often invoked not as a transformative political objective but as an instrument of governance that stabilizes the existing urban order. The mechanisms of participation and social housing, while presented as correctives to inequality, frequently operate within the very structures that perpetuate exclusion. The result is an urban condition where inclusion functions as ideology rather than practice, and where architecture, even when designed with social intent, risks reproducing the inequalities it claims to resolve.

7.1 The Contradictions of Participatory Urbanism

Participatory urbanism in Barcelona emerged as part of the city's democratic renewal after the fall of the Franco regime. It was envisioned as an antidote to the authoritarian and technocratic planning traditions of the past. Neighborhood associations gained political influence, and citizens were encouraged to take part in shaping local development agendas. This participatory ethos was institutionalized through mechanisms such as local councils, community consultations, and public workshops. In principle, these initiatives aimed to empower residents, especially in historically marginalized districts like Ciutat Vella. In practice, participation often served as a procedural tool to legitimize decisions that had already been made within broader political and economic frameworks. Meetings and consultations became rituals of consent rather than spaces of deliberation. Citizens were asked to contribute opinions about pre-defined plans rather than to participate in defining the goals themselves.

This form of participation, which urban anthropologist Manuel Delgado characterizes as participatory neoliberalism, translates democratic aspiration into administrative performance. It converts social dialogue into an instrument of urban management. The appearance of inclusion masks the asymmetry of power between decision-makers and residents. Participation becomes a language of civility that obscures the structural conditions of inequality. In the rehabilitation of Raval and other parts of Ciutat Vella, community involvement often consisted of endorsing projects that prioritized tourism, culture, and heritage preservation over the social needs of existing residents. The legitimacy of rehabilitation was built on the discourse of democratic consensus, yet the outcomes frequently reinforced spatial segregation and economic displacement. The contradictions of participatory urbanism reveal that inclusion without redistribution serves to reinforce the moral authority of planning while leaving its material hierarchies untouched.

The aesthetic and symbolic dimensions of participation compound this paradox. Community engagement is often represented visually through workshops, exhibitions, and participatory installations that showcase inclusion as spectacle. These images circulate widely in municipal communications and international media, portraying Barcelona as a model of civic harmony. The act of participation becomes performative rather than substantive. It demonstrates the appearance of democracy without altering its underlying structure. The architectural projects that result from such processes may incorporate public spaces or cultural facilities labeled as "for the community," yet these spaces often cater to new user groups whose social profiles align with the goals of urban branding. Participation thus becomes a form of design language, a style of governance that domesticates dissent by framing it as contribution.

7.2 Social Housing as a Contained Alternative

The proliferation of social housing and cooperative initiatives in Barcelona appears at first to challenge the commodification of urban space. Projects such as La Borda or Can Batlló have been celebrated for promoting collective ownership, environmental sustainability, and democratic management. They represent attempts to create forms of habitation that resist the speculative logic of the real estate market. Yet these initiatives exist within a broader urban regime that defines the limits of their autonomy. Their small scale and dependence on municipal support render them marginal in relation to the magnitude of housing need. They function as islands of ethical practice within an ocean of speculative development. The city tolerates and even promotes such projects because they contribute to its image as socially progressive while posing no systemic threat to the dominant economic model.

The incorporation of alternative housing models into municipal policy transforms radical experiments into instruments of governance. What begins as a grassroots challenge to property-based urbanism becomes absorbed into the bureaucratic machinery of the state. Cooperative housing is celebrated as innovation, its radical potential neutralized by regulation and symbolism. It becomes evidence of inclusion rather than a vehicle for redistribution. In this sense, social housing functions as a contained alternative, a managed expression of dissent that reinforces rather than disrupts the status quo. The contradiction lies in the coexistence of genuine community empowerment and the structural subordination of such empowerment to the logic of the market. Housing policies that promote diversity and participation are enacted within a city whose economy depends on tourism, real estate speculation, and cultural consumption. The result is a landscape where social experiments coexist with systemic dispossession.

This containment also manifests in the architectural language of social housing. Many projects adopt minimalist aesthetics and environmentally conscious materials that align with the city's global image of design excellence. These buildings, while socially progressive in intention, often serve dual functions: they provide affordable housing and contribute to the city's brand as a site of architectural innovation. Their visual clarity and ethical rhetoric mask the structural limitations of their impact. The architecture of social responsibility becomes a form of urban ornamentation, symbolizing care without addressing the systemic causes of exclusion. The paradox of socially conscious design is that it achieves visibility through the same mechanisms of image production that sustain inequality.

7.3 Architecture Between Complicity and Resistance

Architecture's position within this system is inherently ambivalent. It operates within the tension between complicity and resistance. Architects who seek to address social inequality through design are constrained by the economic and institutional frameworks that commission their work. The production of architecture depends on resources that are often generated through the very processes of commodification and displacement that social design aims to mitigate. The ethical challenge for architects is therefore not only to design inclusive spaces but to confront the political conditions of their practice. Pier Vittorio Aureli's notion of the project of autonomy articulates this challenge by calling for architecture to reveal its dependence on power rather than to conceal it behind formal or moral justifications. Autonomy, in this sense, is not isolation from politics but critical engagement with it.

In Barcelona, the figure of the socially engaged architect has gained prominence, yet this role often operates within institutional boundaries that limit critical agency. Architectural competitions, public commissions, and regulatory frameworks shape the scope of what can be imagined. The desire to create socially responsible architecture risks becoming part of the city's ideological apparatus. Projects designed to foster community or cultural participation may inadvertently contribute to gentrification by enhancing the symbolic value of their surroundings. Architecture's contribution to exclusion is not always intentional but structural. The contradiction lies in its dual capacity to humanize and to commodify, to empower and to discipline. The challenge is not simply to design better buildings but to question the systems of value that determine what "better" means.

Architecture's complicity is not total, however. Within the constraints of neoliberal urbanism, moments of resistance emerge through small-scale interventions, temporary uses, and collaborative processes that challenge the norms of production. These practices may not overturn the system, but they reveal its fragility. They demonstrate that alternative ways of inhabiting and producing space are possible. The political significance of such practices lies in their ability to expose the contradictions of inclusion, to make visible the gap between rhetoric and reality. The ethical task of architecture is to inhabit this gap critically, acknowledging its limitations while refusing to become a mere instrument of consensus.

7.4 Reclaiming the Political Dimension of Space

The re-politicization of spatial practice is essential if rehabilitation is to transcend its role as an instrument of neoliberal governance. The language of inclusion, participation, and sustainability must be reexamined as part of the ideological apparatus that neutralizes conflict. Genuine inclusion requires acknowledging conflict as constitutive of urban life. The right to

the city, as articulated by Lefebvre and later by David Harvey, is not the right to participate in preordained processes but the right to redefine the processes themselves. In Barcelona, this re-politicization has been carried forward by movements such as the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (PAH) and neighborhood associations resisting eviction and touristification. These movements reclaim space not through design but through occupation, protest, and solidarity. Their actions transform the city from an object of governance into a terrain of struggle.

The challenge for architecture is to align itself with these forms of collective action without subsuming them into aesthetics. Architectural practice must move beyond the language of inclusion toward a language of contestation. This requires redefining the role of the architect from designer of objects to participant in social processes. It means understanding space as a political medium shaped by power relations rather than as a neutral field for intervention. In the context of Barcelona, this entails questioning the very foundations of the Barcelona Model—the assumption that design excellence and participatory governance are sufficient to produce social justice. The re-politicization of space demands an acknowledgment that justice cannot be designed, it must be fought for.

The paradox of socially conscious rehabilitation lies in its capacity to reproduce the conditions it seeks to overcome. Inclusion without redistribution, participation without power, and design without politics perpetuate inequality under the guise of progress. To move beyond this paradox requires a redefinition of what architecture can do. It must cease to operate as a language of consensus and become a tool of critique. The city must be understood not as a harmonious organism but as a field of conflicts that cannot be resolved through aesthetics alone. The ethical task of socially conscious architecture is to make these conflicts visible, to give them form, and to refuse the illusion that beauty and justice are equivalent. Only through such critical engagement can the rehabilitation of the city become a process of emancipation rather than exclusion.

8. Conclusion

The rehabilitation of the Old City of Barcelona reveals the intricate relationship between architecture, power, and social transformation. What began as a project of urban recovery grounded in ideals of preservation and democratic renewal evolved into a mechanism of exclusion embedded within the logic of neoliberal governance. Architectural rehabilitation, while improving material conditions and restoring aesthetic continuity, restructured the city's social composition by displacing the very communities whose existence had given meaning to its spaces. The process demonstrates that the renewal of buildings and streets cannot be separated from the renewal of social life, and that when architecture becomes the instrument of economic rationality, the physical restoration of the city often coincides with the erosion of its collective identity.

The case of Barcelona exemplifies how the language of beauty and heritage can disguise processes of dispossession. Rehabilitation operates through an alliance of aesthetics and economics that converts space into commodity and history into capital. The restored façades and reimagined public spaces of Ciutat Vella project an image of harmony and progress, yet this image is sustained by the displacement of residents, the commodification of housing, and the regulation of public life. The city's architectural transformation embodies a paradox in which the celebration of cultural continuity coincides with the erasure of lived memory. What is preserved is not the everyday life of the city but its visual and symbolic form, an appearance of authenticity detached from the social realities that produced it.

This contradiction is not unique to Barcelona but speaks to a global condition of urban modernity. Across the world, historic districts are being reconstituted as stages of cultural consumption where the value of space derives from its capacity to attract capital and attention. The aestheticization of inequality transforms cities into spectacles of progress while concealing the violence of displacement beneath the surface of design. In such a context, architecture becomes a medium through which power organizes perception. The beauty of urban space becomes inseparable from its moral and political justification. When exclusion is rendered as elegance, the city's capacity for self-critique diminishes. The challenge for architecture and urbanism lies in reclaiming the political dimension of space from this aesthetic consensus.

The success of rehabilitation should not be measured by the clarity of its forms or the intensity of its tourism but by its ability to sustain diverse forms of life within a shared territory. A truly democratic city preserves the right to remain as carefully as it preserves stone and façade. The measure of progress lies not in the visual coherence of the built environment but in the social continuity of its communities. Architecture must therefore move beyond its role as a vehicle for market representation and recover its ethical responsibility as a medium of coexistence. The task of the architect is not only to design structures but to defend the conditions that allow people to inhabit them with dignity.

The rehabilitation of the Old City offers both a warning and an invitation. It warns of the ease with which ideals of preservation can be appropriated by the forces of speculation and spectacle. It invites reflection on how cities might reinvent rehabilitation as an act of care rather than control, as a practice that restores social bonds instead of fragmenting them. Such a transformation requires an urban politics that recognizes space as a common good rather than a commodity. It demands an ethics of responsibility that places the rights of inhabitants above the desires of investors and visitors. Only through this reorientation can rehabilitation recover its emancipatory potential and contribute to an urban future grounded in justice, memory, and belonging.

The story of Barcelona's Old City is therefore not merely a local narrative but a mirror in which contemporary urbanism sees both its triumphs and its failures. It reveals that the preservation of form without the preservation of life leads to a hollow city, beautiful yet uninhabited in its spirit. To move beyond this condition, the city must embrace an urbanism that values permanence of community over permanence of image. Architectural rehabilitation, when freed from its complicity with capital, holds the possibility of becoming a form of resistance, a means of building not only structures but solidarities. Only when the renewal of space coincides with the renewal of social justice can the city truly be said to have healed itself.

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